

## Cameron's 'Mandate': Democracy, Legitimacy and Conservative Leadership

BY ANDREW DENHAM AND KIERON O'HARA

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### ABSTRACT

In December 2005, the British Conservative Party elected a new leader, David Cameron. As Cameron's leadership comes increasingly under the spotlight, he may be required to justify unpopular decisions and policy directions without necessarily being able to demonstrate the ultimate prospect of electoral success. Accordingly, the nature and extent of his victory in the 2005 leadership election is likely to be one of his chief arguments. In this article, we seek to evaluate that argument and contend that, in common with his predecessors, Cameron's 'mandate' at the outset of his leadership is of limited extent and significance; that his legitimacy is ultimately conditional on his performance as leader and that, again in common with his predecessors, it will be for Conservative MPs (or Cameron himself) to decide when that legitimacy is no longer sufficient to sustain him in office. The main reason for this is that, despite the apparent 'democratisation' of Conservative leadership selection over time, the Party's MPs remain the ultimate source of legitimacy for an incumbent leader, because they—and they alone—decide when that legitimacy should be withdrawn. In this context, it is interesting, and perhaps significant, to note that Cameron narrowly failed to secure the support, expressed in actual votes, of a majority of Conservative MPs before becoming leader. This, in turn, would suggest that his perceived legitimacy as leader may yet prove fragile should he propose substantive policy changes that the Party's MPs are unwilling to endorse.

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IN December 2005, the British Conservative Party elected a new leader for the fourth time since its landslide defeat in 1997. Most Conservatives appear to accept that the Party has to change if it is to stand any chance of returning to office, but equally the arguments about what needs to change, by how much and why have not yet been resolved. In this context, the legitimacy of David Cameron's position, and of the changes he proposes to make to Party policy, will be of critical importance. The perceived successes and failures of Cameron's leadership will ultimately determine his fate, but his initial impetus stems from the nature and extent of the 'mandate' he has already secured. As Cameron comes increasingly under the spotlight, he may be required to justify unpopular decisions and policy directions without necessarily

being able to demonstrate the ultimate prospect of electoral success. Accordingly, the nature and extent of his victory in the 2005 leadership election is likely to be one of his chief arguments.

In this article, we seek to evaluate that argument. We contend that, in common with his predecessors, especially since 1965, Cameron's 'mandate' at the outset of his leadership is of limited extent and significance; that his legitimacy is ultimately conditional on his subsequent performance as leader and that, again in common with his predecessors, it will be for Conservative MPs (or Cameron himself) to decide when that legitimacy is no longer sufficient to sustain him in office. The main reason for this is that, despite the apparent 'democratisation' of Conservative leadership selection over time, the reality is that the Party's MPs remain the ultimate source of legitimacy for an incumbent leader, because they—and they alone—decide when that legitimacy should be withdrawn. In this context, it is interesting, and perhaps significant, to note that Cameron fell short of securing the support, expressed in actual votes, of a majority of Conservative MPs before becoming leader. This, in turn, would suggest that Cameron's parliamentary support, and hence his perceived legitimacy as leader, may prove fragile should he propose substantive policy changes that the Party's MPs are unwilling to endorse.

### *The life and death of the 'magic circle'*

The Conservative Party is the oldest of the mainstream British parties, but was the last to introduce a formal procedure for selecting or removing its leader by democratic means. Its first elected leader was Edward Heath in 1965 (it would be a further 10 years before the Party's MPs secured the constitutional right to remove an unpopular incumbent who did not wish to resign—Heath being once more, albeit reluctantly, the pioneer). Prior to that date, the Conservative leader was selected via an informal system that became disparagingly known as the 'magic circle'. Under this system, following an unspecified consultation procedure, a single name would be presented for endorsement at a Party meeting, the exact composition of which was never formally prescribed.

The year before the introduction of formal selection rules saw the re-issue of Robert McKenzie's classic work *British Political Parties*. The most striking feature of the Conservative Party's organisation, McKenzie argued, was the 'enormous power which appears to be concentrated in the hands of the leader'. The formal powers of Conservative leaders have always been—and remain—formidable. In opposition, the leader alone appoints the entire Shadow Cabinet, as well as the Party Chairman and head of the Research Department. In theory, if not in practice, he or she also has sole responsibility for formulating Party policy. The *quid pro quo* of all this is that he or she is ultimately responsible for leading the Party into government, and for sustaining it there. As McKenzie correctly pointed out,

the Conservative leader 'achieves office and retains power only with the consent of his followers; and there is ample precedent for the withdrawal of that consent'.<sup>1</sup>

McKenzie noted of Conservative leadership selection that the process had 'few parallels in the struggle for power that goes on within other democratic organisations. The most striking fact ... is that each leader has been elected [sic] by acclamation; no ballot, nor any formal contest of any kind, has ever taken place'.<sup>2</sup> Before 1965, the Conservative leader was always either the incumbent or a former Prime Minister. In opposition, the position of 'Party Leader' remained vacant if no former Prime Minister were available to serve in that capacity. In that event, the Party would have two leaders: one in the Commons, the other in the Lords. When the Party returned to office, the King or Queen would invite a Conservative to form a government and become Prime Minister. Having been endorsed by the Party, as described above, he then became 'Party Leader' as well.

This 'system' was used until the notorious 'war of the Macmillan succession' in 1963 brought it into apparent disrepute, with damaging consequences for the Party. Macmillan's sudden resignation as Prime Minister turned its annual Conference, meeting in Blackpool, into an unofficial leadership convention, a situation without historical precedent. From his hospital bed, Macmillan hastily devised a procedure to be used for the first (and only) time, cleverly disguising its constitutional novelty with an oblique reference to the Party's 'customary processes of consultation'. The story of what happened next has been told many times since, and space prevents the addition of a further, protracted narrative here.<sup>3</sup> Suffice it to say that the selection of Lord Home was deeply controversial, the Party went on to lose the 1964 General Election and the legitimacy of the 'magic circle' received a further blow with Iain Macleod's famous diatribe in the *Spectator*, alleging its domination by Etonians and the underhand tactics of the victors.<sup>4</sup> The contrast between the 'fourteenth Earl' and his newly elected Labour counterpart, Harold Wilson, made the 'system' that had produced the former appear anachronistic, and hence obsolete.

### *Heath to Hague*

The solution to the perceived legitimacy problem was the introduction of a formal procedure for electing the Party leader, in line with a general trend in the twentieth century wherein a popular mandate was increasingly seen as the best, indeed sometimes the only, source of legitimacy.<sup>5</sup> However, the underlying aim of the new system was to preserve as many of the perceived advantages of the old as possible. The 'magic circle' had been a discreet operation that kept potentially damaging disagreement away from the public eye; it was flexible, and could be adapted to the immediate context; it was quick (indeed, the entire process could be completed within hours); strength and depth of

feeling for and against particular candidates could be 'weighed'; it allowed a compromise candidate to 'emerge' where opinion between two or more leading contenders was deeply divided. Finally, 'expert' opinion—not least that of the Party's outgoing leader—was accorded more significance than that of lesser mortals, in line with the Conservatives' traditional respect for hierarchy, authority and deference. As such, the 'magic circle' was both exclusive and unashamedly elitist. Consistent with that ethos, it was decided that the choice of leader after 1965 should be restricted to the Party's MPs. The extra-parliamentary Party could express its views, but MPs alone would have the right to vote.

The new procedure provided for a series of eliminative ballots, up to a maximum of three. The first would produce a winner only if one candidate achieved an overall majority and 15% more votes than the number cast for any other. Should the first ballot prove inconclusive, a second would be held. Anyone could stand, including candidates defeated in the first round. An overall majority would now secure outright victory. Otherwise, the top three candidates would proceed to a third ballot, to be decided on the alternative vote (AV) procedure. From 1965, six elections were held under some or other variation of this system (1965, 1975, 1989, 1990, 1995 and 1997). Only in 1997 was a third ballot actually used.

As noted above, the new procedure deliberately sought to preserve the key elements of Macmillan's 'customary processes'. The super-majority required to win on the first ballot was intended to ensure that the victor enjoyed overwhelming support among the Party's MPs. Multiple ballots also had the advantage of offering genuine rather than hypothetical choices, allowing MPs to choose between the actual candidates available, rather than deciding whom they might ultimately prefer if certain counterfactual conditions obtained. They also allowed informal consultation and opinion surveys (of Conservatives and the wider electorate) to take place between successive rounds of voting, and the possibility of a 'compromise' candidate being chosen instead of someone who might otherwise divide the Party.<sup>6</sup> In other respects, the introduction of formal rules profoundly changed the nature of the selection process and its outcomes. In particular, the range and identity of possible candidates was formalised; campaigning became overt and organised; and candidates could now elect to stand for reasons other than ultimate victory, whether to put down a marker for the future, or draw attention to an otherwise neglected point of view. The result was a wider range of motivations, of social and educational backgrounds and of political experience, with proportionately fewer candidates having attended public school or Oxbridge, or held (or, in some cases, even shadowed) any of the 'great offices of state'.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, the 1965 system remained congruent with the 'magic circle' in a further, crucial respect. The legitimacy it conferred

was ultimately contingent on the leader's subsequent performance, rather than the circumstances of the election itself. Arguably, this applied with particular force to any Conservative leader elected in opposition, who would remain 'on probation' until he (or she) had led the 'natural party of government' to victory in a General Election. As noted above, every Conservative leader before 1965 had been a serving or former Prime Minister. As well as being a key source of authority and legitimacy in itself, this gave the incumbent the tactical advantages of setting the political agenda and choosing the date of the next General Election. Of the seven Tory leaders elected since, the only one to have assumed that role when the Party was in government was John Major. Although Major led the Party to victory in the 1992 General Election, he subsequently lost the confidence (and, in 1995, support expressed in actual votes) of a significant number of 'Thatcherite' and Eurosceptic Conservative MPs, who were now disinclined to regard him as Margaret Thatcher's 'legitimate' successor.

In practice, all four leaders elected under the 1965 system struggled to establish their legitimacy from the outset. In 1965, Heath secured barely half the actual, let alone eligible, votes of MPs—150 out of 298 (a further 6 abstained). Technically, he failed to achieve the super-majority required to win outright, but both Maudling and Powell withdrew and no other candidate came forward to force a second ballot. Chosen as the Party's 'answer' to Harold Wilson, Heath's initial performances were largely ineffective. He was simply no match for Wilson across the despatch box, or on television. After leading the Party to defeat in the 1966 General Election, he briefly became the most unpopular Opposition Leader since records began. It took Labour's perceived problems over devaluation and a largely unexpected General Election victory in 1970 to settle anxieties about Heath's leadership in his favour, for the time being at least.<sup>8</sup> By October 1974, Heath had 'lost' three General Elections out of four—and thus failed the ultimate test of legitimacy that applies to all Conservative leaders. In February 1975, Margaret Thatcher defeated him decisively on the first ballot and achieved the required majority on the second. Despite this, her grip on the parliamentary Party, although strengthened by victory in 1979 General Election, was finally secured only by the first signs of (modest) economic recovery and victory in the Falklands War in 1982. Seven years later, Thatcher's apparently comprehensive defeat of Sir Anthony Meyer (314 votes to 33, with 27 abstentions) actually underlined the fact that she had already lost the confidence of a significant number of Conservative MPs.

As in 1965, the scale of John Major's victory in November 1990 was somewhat less than a ringing endorsement. Not only did he fall two votes short of the overall majority he technically required; the rules themselves were then deliberately violated by the Chairman of the 1922 Committee. As we noted earlier, the rule stated that if the second

ballot failed to give any candidate an overall majority, the top three contenders would proceed to a third ballot, to be decided on the AV procedure. In 1990, however, there had only been three candidates in the second ballot: John Major scoring 185, Michael Heseltine 131 and Douglas Hurd 56. Heseltine and Hurd immediately withdrew, even though the rules did not permit them to; nevertheless, it was generally supposed that the result of the third ballot was inevitable, and no one criticised Cranley Onslow for using his discretion. In 1991, the rules were changed to allow such withdrawals and to confine the third ballot (if required) to the top two candidates. Major's (apparently decisive) victory over John Redwood in 1995 failed to restore the confidence of the Party's MPs (a third of whom voted for Redwood or abstained) in his leadership for more than a short period; he had almost as much difficulty in controlling his unruly parliamentary Party after the leadership election as before.<sup>9</sup>

The final election under (a variation of) the 1965 system took place after Major's resignation in 1997. Once again, the legitimacy conferred by the system on the eventual winner was limited. The first two ballots were very inconclusive, and the final ballot produced a solid (though not overwhelming) victory for William Hague over Kenneth Clarke by a margin of 22 votes (92 to 70). In addition, Hague bore all the hallmarks of a 'compromise' candidate. The size of the electorate was tiny (an unprecedented 165 MPs). In addition, two of the favourites were unable to stand (Michael Portillo, the chief right wing candidate had lost his parliamentary seat, while Michael Heseltine suffered an angina attack shortly after the General Election and promptly withdrew). The campaign was long and acrimonious. The parliamentary Party ultimately chose the self-styled 'unity' candidate, but in so doing 'succeeded' only in giving most commentators (and the wider electorate) the impression of being more divided than ever.<sup>10</sup> As well as inheriting the poisoned chalice of a bitterly divided Party, Hague's legitimacy was regarded by his opponents as highly suspect from the outset. In particular, the suspicion remained that, had he been a candidate, Portillo 'would have won'. Having never defeated him in a formal contest, this problem (not of his making) would return to haunt Hague when Portillo returned to parliament in 1999.

### *2001–03: full circle to the magic circle*

The unruly behaviour of the parliamentary Party from 1992 to 1997 dismayed many Conservatives in the country. The National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations had anyway long been dissatisfied with its virtual exclusion from the process of choosing the leader. Consequently, one of Hague's promises during the 1997 campaign had been to revise the system if he won. The following year, the 1965 system finally came to an end. The electorate was now expanded to include the Party's mass membership—many of whom no longer

trusted Conservative MPs (if they ever did) to make 'informed' decisions.

The ensuing changes were essentially twofold. The rule allowing annual challenges to the incumbent had long been regarded as suspect. The defeat of Heath in 1975 and enforced resignation of Thatcher in 1990 had taken place without consulting Party members, and Major's position was subsequently destabilised by continuous speculation about a possible challenge to his leadership. In view of this, there would now be an additional hurdle for a would-be challenger to surmount. In order to trigger a contest, 15% of the Party's MPs would have to notify the Chairman of the 1922 Committee in writing to that effect. There would then be a vote of confidence in the leader among MPs. If the incumbent were defeated, a series of eliminative ballots among MPs would follow until only two candidates remained. At this point, the second change would come into effect. Once MPs had whittled the field down to two, the extra-parliamentary Party would make the final decision by means of a postal ballot.

The first election to take place under the new rules was in 2001. Hague stood down voluntarily—his inability to dent Tony Blair's majority giving him no chance of hanging on, even if he had wanted to—so no vote of confidence was required. Five candidates elected to stand, with Portillo and Kenneth Clarke seen as the key players. Both were divisive figures, however. As in 1997, Clarke's pro-European views were unacceptable to many MPs (and would now, it was assumed, prove equally unacceptable to Party members as a whole). Portillo, for his part, was weakened by allegations of disloyalty towards Hague; his social libertarianism; and revelations of past homosexual experiences. Clarke memorably opined that a choice between himself and Portillo would force the Party's mass membership to decide if they were more Europhobic than homophobic, or *vice versa*.

Michael Ancram offered himself specifically as a 'compromise' candidate. David Davis, one of the few Conservatives to have enhanced his reputation during the Hague years thanks to his chairmanship of the Public Accounts Committee, elected to put down a marker for the future. The final candidate was Iain Duncan Smith, who attracted the atavistic and Euro-sceptic right with his military background and history of rebellion against the Major government's attempts to secure ratification of the Maastricht Treaty. As in 1997, the campaign was a long and acrimonious affair, at once reflecting and amplifying the Party's underlying tensions, especially over Europe.

A series of ballots took place; three were required to eliminate three candidates (of whom one, Davis, withdrew voluntarily). The debacle of the first ballot—due to bad rule-drafting, no provision was made to eliminate candidates if there was a tie for last place, which duly happened between Ancram and Davis—prompted impatience in even the most Tory of newspapers. Portillo, the favourite, was widely seen as



having underperformed—despite receiving more votes than anyone else in each of the first two rounds. In the third, with Ancram eliminated and Davis having quit, Portillo's vote barely increased at all, and he fell to third place. Clarke, to many people's surprise, won the third ballot (having come third in the first two) and went through to the ballot of Party members with the runner-up Duncan Smith. That ballot, which was very protracted over a hot summer, was won comfortably by Duncan Smith.<sup>11</sup>

Doubts were immediately raised about Duncan Smith's position. Richard Kelly pointed out that very few MPs had voted for him—39 in the first ballot, 42 in the second and 54 in the third (beating Portillo by a single vote), never more than a third of the parliamentary Party. Compounding that, prominent figures such as Clarke, Portillo, Ann Widdecombe, Archie Norman and Francis Maude refused to serve in his Shadow Cabinet. Only 25 disaffected MPs were required to trigger a vote of no confidence in Duncan Smith, and fewer than 90 members would have to vote against him to finish him off. It was a precarious position. Kelly also pointed out, again correctly, that the unwieldiness of the Hague procedure could work in Duncan Smith's favour, in that a vote of no confidence in his leadership would conceivably trigger yet another long, drawn-out, possibly acrimonious campaign with all the unflattering media attention that would ensue.<sup>12</sup> Whatever its merits, a serious drawback of the new system was that a wedge had now been driven between those who hired the leader (Party members) and those who fired him (Tory MPs).

Duncan Smith managed to ride out the so-called 'Betsygate' scandal, where he was accused of having employed his wife on a sinecure in his office. But within weeks, and just days after the 2003 Party Conference, the signatures were found, the no confidence motion called, and Duncan Smith had become the first Tory leader since Austen Chamberlain to be ousted before ever fighting a General Election. On the other hand, his position had been precarious for a long time, but the hands of the potential assassins were stayed (just as Kelly had anticipated) by the desire of most MPs to avoid yet another protracted leadership election.

Following Duncan Smith's departure, the Party was now threatened with a repeat performance of the same, unwieldy election process, except in one respect. The contest would not be as prolonged as in 2001, when the Electoral Reform Society, concerned that many Party members would be on holiday, insisted on a very protracted timetable. At a time when Labour was vulnerable to further attack, notably over Iraq, the Party again appeared more pre-occupied with its own internal affairs than with the business of effective opposition. The subsequent 'emergence' of a single candidate, Michael Howard, meant, of course, that the Party had effectively gone full circle back to the magic circle. It had tacitly reverted to the doctrine of Ernest Pretyman, a Tory MP



who had said in 1921 'The leader is there, and we all know when he is there. ... [I]t will be a bad day [when we] have solemnly to meet to elect a leader'.<sup>13</sup> An effort worthy of Macmillan himself had been expended to ensure that Howard was unopposed. Given Howard's apparently overwhelming support in the parliamentary Party, the nightmare scenario was that he would win a substantial majority among MPs, only to lose the ballot of Party members. In that event, the new leader would (like Duncan Smith before him) 'enjoy' the confidence of only a minority of Conservative MPs from the outset. By opting to revert to the 'magic circle', the latter had 'followed up their vote of no confidence in their leader with an even more resounding vote of no confidence in their own selection rules'.<sup>14</sup>

### *From May to December: the election of David Cameron*

In surprising contrast, predicted by a few, the leadership election of 2005 appeared to provide a powerful endorsement of the system introduced by Hague. Initially, Howard had seemed to make matters worse by announcing, immediately after the General Election, his intention to step down, but only after his successor had been chosen. To Howard's critics, this 'long goodbye', coupled with his declared intention to change the leadership selection rules, compounded the problem of another potentially protracted contest with one of uncertainty. He had effectively fired the starting gun for the succession, but condemned prospective candidates and their supporters to a period of 'phoney war'. Before they could start campaigning in earnest, they were hamstrung by the fact that no one, including Howard himself, could be certain what the rules would be, or who (MPs or Party members) would have the final say.

As we have seen, the existing rules had produced a highly unsatisfactory leader in Duncan Smith on the first occasion, and only 'worked' on the second because Tory MPs denied the Party's wider membership any choice. Consequently, a committee led by Party Chairman Francis Maude and the Chair of the Convention of Conservative Local Associations and Election Agents drew up a new procedure. Under this system, any candidate who received the support of 50% of the Party's MPs would become leader. Otherwise, any candidate who could demonstrate 10% support among MPs would be put before a non-binding vote of the Convention, after which a ballot of MPs would determine the outcome. There was some argument about this system when it was first proposed; it was seen as an attempt to disenfranchise the wider membership (which, of course, it was). Despite these protests, the Party's MPs (predictably) endorsed a minor variant of the original proposal on 15 June.

Howard's initial hope was that his successor would be chosen shortly after the Party's Blackpool Conference in October, with MPs (not Party members) having the final say. This left Davis as

the front-runner, able to campaign, but so far in front that virtually anything he said or did entailed significant risk—it was far easier to lose support than gain it. He was accused of talking in cliché and of ‘mind-numbing banality’. Opposition to Davis seemed weak at this stage; the only certainty was that David Cameron would run, even though his lack of experience seemed to discount him. Clarke made speeches and statements that were noticeably more Eurosceptic in tone, signalling a desire (finally) to win over his party. The final candidate to declare was Liam Fox, who sought to present himself, like Davis, as a ‘moderniser’ of the right.

All calculations were thrown away, however, when the Convention declined to endorse the proposed changes in September. Having tasted the fruits of democracy as recently as 2001, the extra-parliamentary Party was—understandably—unwilling to give them up. Given the imminence of the Party Conference, and in the interests of minimising delay, the existing rules therefore received a stay of execution. The Blackpool Conference, where Cameron made a highly successful speech and Davis a disappointing—if not disastrous—one, received extensive coverage in the national news media. By the following weekend, the findings of several opinion polls suggested that Cameron was now seen by Conservative voters as the ‘best potential leader’ of the Party.

The first ballot of MPs effectively resolved itself into two primaries. The parliamentary Party divided (almost) equally between the two centre-left candidates and their two counterparts on the right. Of the two right wing candidates, Davis led Fox by 20 votes (62 votes to 42); on the centre-left, Cameron defeated Clarke by a similar margin (56 votes to 38). As the candidate with the fewest votes, Clarke was eliminated from the contest.

As in 1997 and 2001, the support of right wing MPs again failed to coalesce around a single candidate. Predictably, however, the majority voted for Davis or Fox on the first ballot and did so again on the second. This allowed Cameron to establish a healthy lead of 33 (90 votes to 57) over Davis after the second ballot. As expected, most of Clarke’s supporters on the first ballot switched to Cameron on the second. Having received five fewer votes on the second ballot than on the first, Davis lost momentum (and the votes of several right wing MPs) to Fox, whose tally increased by nine. With 51 votes, he now trailed Davis by only six, narrowly failing to secure second place and thus the right to contest the final ballot of Party members. Accordingly, as the candidate with the fewest votes, he was eliminated from the contest.

After the final round of parliamentary voting, Cameron received further public endorsements from 10 of Fox’s erstwhile supporters (including 6 members of the 25-strong Cornerstone Group, whose failure to produce an organised response to the various eliminations

severely reduced the influence of their traditionalist views). This allowed his campaign team to declare he now enjoyed the backing of 100 MPs (just over half the parliamentary Party). On 18 October, the same day as the result of the second ballot was announced, a poll in the *Daily Telegraph* suggested that Cameron was now the first choice of Party members. The result of the all-Party ballot announced on 6 December suggested that the national campaign had made little (if any) difference to the outcome. Cameron received 134,446 votes, compared with 64,398 for Davis. Unlike 2001 (or 2003), the Party's wider membership had endorsed the prior 'recommendation' of Tory MPs, and by the apparently impressive margin of more than two to one. For the first time under the Hague rules, a candidate who had actually won a ballot of Conservative MPs now became leader of the Party. The final phase of the campaign appeared to have ended in a low-scoring (and 'honourable') draw when—to use a different sporting analogy—Davis desperately needed, but failed, to land a knockout blow.<sup>15</sup>

### *Cameron's 'Mandate'*

Despite the apparently impressive scale of his victory in the final ballot of Party members, however, the nature and extent of Cameron's 'mandate' remained unclear. As we have seen, 104 MPs (over half of the parliamentary Party) voted for the two right wing candidates (Davis and Fox) on the first ballot, whereas the two 'centre-left' contenders (Cameron and Clarke) combined received only 94. On the second ballot, Davis and Fox received four more votes (108) than on the first, out-polling the 'centrist' (but 'left-leaning') Cameron by 18. It has been suggested that some Cameron supporters may have voted tactically for Davis in the second ballot, thereby ensuring the final ballot of Party members would be between Cameron and Davis (whom Cameron's supporters now regarded as the 'weaker' of the two right wing candidates).<sup>16</sup> Either way, the fact remains that a majority of the Party's 198 MPs voted—twice—for a right wing candidate. As we have seen, 10 of these MPs subsequently endorsed Cameron, but (significantly) only when the option of voting for Fox no longer existed. In addition, some of these MPs were vehemently opposed to Davis from the outset. With Fox out of the running, they believed they had no option but to support Cameron, notwithstanding their reservations. As one right wing MP put it, although he was far closer, politically and ideologically, to Davis than Cameron, 'we are looking for someone to get us back into government, and Cameron ticks all the right boxes' (*Daily Telegraph*, 29 October 2005). In terms of his wider 'legitimacy' among Party members, Cameron's critics could also point to the fact that over 54,000 ballot papers were never returned, indicative perhaps of a significant level of indifference about the outcome, dissatisfaction with the two remaining candidates, or both.

In terms of ideology, policy and the Party's future 'direction of travel', it remained similarly unclear what—if anything—Cameron had received a mandate *for*. He was taken to be the modernisation candidate, but the term 'modernisation' had been appropriated by three of the four candidates in the election, the exception being Clarke. Davis had stood in 2001 on a modernisation platform, and he, Fox and Cameron all made contrasting speeches to the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) to establish their modernising credentials.<sup>17</sup> 'Modernisation' seemed to mean different things to different people, and only by examining the texts the politicians produced could one distinguish between the various versions. The precise extent to which this was done by Conservative MPs and Party members is not known, but is arguably the only basis on which a 'mandate' for Cameron's particular brand of 'modernisation' could be claimed.

A series of meetings at the CPS during the campaign tried to nail the concept down, but ultimately failed to do so. *Rapporteuse* Janet Daley worried that 'modernisation' might merely be a way of avoiding making hard and unpopular decisions. 'To put it bluntly,' she argued, 'a large proportion of the Parliamentary Party seems to have lost its nerve over proposing any reform of public services or the tax and benefit system which threatens to cause public alarm – even when that alarm is based on economic illiteracy or practical ignorance. This could mean that the modernising programme of the new leadership is simply a way of pandering to an almost superstitious level of anxiety on the part of the electorate'.<sup>18</sup> Even after this debate, the argument about 'modernisation' remained (and remains) far from settled.

Ultimately, Cameron's position is not unlike that of Tony Blair in his period as Leader of the Opposition, where his perceived dismantling of traditional Labour ideological structures was tolerated only because he could hold out the promise of electoral success. Opinion about Blair was uncertain throughout this period. The Conservative Party in the end decided to portray him as a sort of 'Trojan horse' who would place unpopular trade unionists and left wingers in key government positions (a ludicrous charge with hindsight). The left, meanwhile, hoped that the Tory idea was true, while simultaneously worrying that Blair was a 'closet Tory'. Cameron is in a not dissimilar position, being portrayed by Labour as 'Dave the Chameleon', a cartoon figure that says whatever different people want to hear, while the right continues to wonder whether he really means what he says about 'social justice' or the environment. The question now is whether Cameron, unlike his immediate predecessors, has the political will to move his Party onto (or at least near to) the 'middle ground' of British politics.

To continue the Blair analogy, it would help Cameron immensely if he could guarantee the same prospect of victory in a General Election, but this remains far from certain, given the Tories' starting point and the difficult demographics. Hence, non-parliamentary elections, such

as local elections, are of unusual importance, in that they offer him a rare opportunity to demonstrate that his attempt to woo the voters is working. The importance of the local elections of May 2006—Cameron's first significant electoral test as leader—was indicated by the Conservatives' meta-campaigning effort being chiefly concerned with lowering expectations, claiming (falsely) that a gain of 100 seats would be a good result.

In the event, the result was a qualified success, with the Conservatives gaining 269 seats overall and 11 councils, with just under 40% of the national vote. The Party's urban credentials were boosted by a massive improvement in London (though they later had great difficulty even finding a mayoralty candidate for the capital). Despite these successes, however, Cameron is not yet able to demonstrate beyond all reasonable doubt that his method is working in such a way as to silence his critics. The Party's showing in national opinion polls is respectable; a slender Tory lead arrived in the spring of 2006, and was starting to look pretty robust by late summer. On the other hand, Tony Blair's unpopularity probably contributed to that lead, in which case the much-anticipated change of Labour leadership is a key locus of uncertainty. Furthermore, the Conservatives have so far made little headway in several key cities outside London, particularly in the North of England.

While Cameron's attacking options are to his left; however, he also remains vulnerable to his right. Hence, he has not been relentless in his move to the centre. In this respect, the summer of 2006 brought two notable policy setbacks. A speech on scrapping the Human Rights Act was very badly received (not least by Clarke, now heading up a task force on the constitution), while his attempts to pull the Conservatives out of the European Peoples Parties (EPP) grouping in the European Parliament not only encountered opposition from a significant number of Conservative MEPs but also highlighted the Party's perceived affinities with a number of unsavoury populists across Europe.

### *Conclusion*

The Conservative Party has traditionally been noteworthy in British politics for being more interested in power than purity of ideology. As a result, the legitimacy of the Tory leader depends to a large extent on the likelihood that he or she will deliver victory at the next General Election. When the selection process for leader is implicated in electoral defeat, as it was after 1964, October 1974 (there was no way of removing Heath) and 1997, then there is a pressure to change the system.

The Hague system appears to have had three completely different results in its three outings. At the time of writing, the choice of Cameron is generally perceived as a 'good' result, which may well save it from alteration in the near future. However, it has not given Cameron enough legitimacy, according to his critics on the right, to

change policy in whatever way he sees fit. Likening him to Pol Pot, as Lord Tebbit did, is perhaps one of the more bizarre interventions in British politics, but is symptomatic of Cameron's failure to establish his own interpretation of 'modernisation' as the correct or only one. The MPs' votes certainly showed that Cameron, as a personality, was appealing and acceptable to opinion beyond the Conservative Party as a whole, but they also showed that over half of the parliamentary Party would welcome a leader with a right wing 'modernising' agenda. For different reasons, neither Davis nor Fox fitted the bill. Conversely, many right wing MPs (and Party members) voted for Cameron in part because of his robust Euroscepticism (as evidenced by his campaign pledge to withdraw the Party's MEPs from the EPP group) and his promise of a tax allowance for married couples. Both 'chose' a left-leaning 'moderniser', but one who made key concessions to their own world-view, and only when their preferred option of electing a plausible, right wing Tory leader was no longer available.<sup>19</sup>

We have argued that the support of the Party as a whole—which Cameron can certainly demonstrate, like Heath in 1975, Thatcher in 1990 and Duncan Smith in 2003—is not sufficient to establish legitimacy. Cameron has not demonstrated, in terms of actual votes, the support of a majority of the Party's MPs. Thanks to the demographic handicap that the Tories currently have to endure, he cannot demonstrate the likelihood of election victory (as yet). And the key term of Cameron's appeal—he is a moderniser of a party that is widely perceived to be stuck in the past—is contested by various different opponents, all of whom will try to resist a move towards the centre. Hence, even the extent of his 'mandate' to review policy—notwithstanding the constitutional position that this remains the leader's 'unilateral' responsibility—is arguably somewhat unclear.

All of which suggests that Cameron may be in for a difficult time in the months and years ahead. The leadership election was concluded over a year ago, and he has received all the legitimacy from the result that he is going to get. The history of the Conservative Party, its ethos and constitution, all teach us that from now on electoral success, in practice and in prospect, are Cameron's best hope for resisting pressure from his opponents within the (parliamentary) Party, asserting his authority and securing his legitimacy.

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3 For a detailed account, see I. Gilmour and M. Garnett, *Whatever Happened to the Tories?* Fourth Estate, 1997, Ch. 8.

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- 8 For Heath as Opposition Leader, see A. Roth, *Heath and the Heathmen*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972; R. Rhodes James, *Ambitions and Realities: British Politics 1964–70*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972.
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- 14 T. Quinn, 'Leasehold or Freehold? Leader-Eviction Rules in the British Conservative and Labour Parties', *Political Studies*, 53, 2005, 806.
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- 16 T. Montgomerie, 'How Cameron Won ... and Davis Lost', [http://conservativehome.blogs.com/tory-leadership/2005/12/how\\_cameron\\_won.html](http://conservativehome.blogs.com/tory-leadership/2005/12/how_cameron_won.html), p. 3.
- 17 D. Davis, *Modern Conservatism*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005; L. Fox, *Modern Conservatism*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005; D. Cameron, *Practical Conservatism*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005; D. Cameron, *Creating Wealth and Eliminating Poverty – At Home and Abroad*, Centre for Policy Studies, 2005.
- 18 J. Daley, *What Does Modernisation Mean?* Centre for Policy Studies, 2005.
- 19 Denham and Dorey, 'A Tale of Two Speeches?' p. 41.