

Electing the Conservative Leader 1997-2005

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The Conservative Party was the last of the major political parties in Britain to involve its ordinary “grass roots” members in the election of their leaders. The Labour Party gave its constituency members 30% of the votes in an electoral college for the first time in 1983, while the Liberal Democrats’ members have always elected their leaders since the formation of the party in 1988 following precedent from the Liberal Party. However, the Conservatives were for a long time somewhat reluctant to trust their members with the task.

Until 1998, the Conservative leader was elected by its MPs, using variations on a system dating back to 1965 involving a series of ballots taking place until a candidate achieved a set proportion of the votes. There were a number of advantages of this system. In particular, the MPs were seen as experts, on both the requirements of the leadership position, and the personal qualities of the candidates. It was also quick and (if no-one blabbed to the press) discreet – most contests only took a few days.

However, after the 1997 General Election when the Conservatives suffered huge losses, the old system looked inadequate when John Major immediately resigned to trigger a contest. There were no Conservative MPs in either Scotland or Wales, so whole areas of the country were unrepresented in the process. Furthermore, many experienced Conservatives had either retired or lost their seats, which rather undermined the argument about MPs’ superior expertise.

The grass roots members were becoming increasingly disenchanted with their exclusion from the process of electing the leader. They were supposedly consulted by the 1922 Committee of backbench Conservative MPs’, but the MPs had consistently ignored their views. The members were particularly outraged by the deposing of Margaret Thatcher in 1990, and their advice (to elect the well-known and popular Kenneth Clarke) was rejected again in 1997. Given that it was the behaviour of MPs squabbling over the terms of Britain’s membership of the European Union that had undermined Major’s government and helped cause the General Election defeat, this was very galling for the extra-Parliamentary party.

After some years of neglect, the party organisation was in a ramshackle state as well, and in his leadership campaign in 1997, William Hague promised a new leadership election system which would include the members, partly to raise their profile in order

to help recruitment. As it was, Hague defeated Clarke in the final leadership contest among the MPs in 1997, and in 1998 implemented his proposals for a new system.

This system, which is still in place, has three stages. The first is a challenge to the current leader, which can be triggered if 15% of Conservative MPs write to the Chairman of the 1922 Committee and demand a contest. If this happens, then there is a no-confidence vote which takes place among MPs only; if the leader gets over 50% of the votes, he or she can continue and the process ends, but if the score is 50% or under, he or she is deposed, and we move to the second stage. Now, new candidates (the rejected leader cannot stand) declare themselves, and the MPs hold a series of ballots on a *Strictly Come Dancing*-style system where whoever comes bottom is eliminated. This stage carries on until there are two candidates left. At this point, we move to stage three, which is a postal ballot over a series of weeks of the extra-Parliamentary party as to who they prefer between the final two.

Many people were worried by this system when it was unveiled, as it splits the basis of power within the party. The grass roots members do the hiring, but the MPs do the firing. The MPs actually retain a lot of the power that they used to have; they control whether a leader carries on, and if not, they decide which choice of MPs will be put to the party members.

This new system has been used three times, with decidedly mixed results. In 2001, there was no need for the no-confidence vote, as the contest was triggered by Hague's resignation. Prominent MP Ann Widdecombe joined the contest early on, but withdrew, complaining that though she had much support in the party as a whole she was unpopular at Westminster. She maintained that grass roots members wanted to vote for her, but that the MPs would make sure she was eliminated long before the final ballot.

In the end, five candidates stood. The first ballot of MPs was a disaster: two candidates, Michael Ancram and David Davis, shared last place, and the rules made no provision as to what to do in such circumstances! (The Liberal Party had had a similar experience in its leadership election of 1967, but in that case the two candidates withdrew from the contest.) So a second ballot had to take place with exactly the same set of candidates; Ancram was eliminated, after which Davis withdrew. The third ballot was finely balanced. Kenneth Clarke, who was thought too pro-Europe to lead the party, won the ballot with 59 votes. Iain Duncan Smith, a prominent rebel against Major's government, was second with 54 votes. Third, and therefore eliminated, was the early favourite Michael Portillo with 53. The campaign had been extremely ill-tempered, dominated by allegations about homosexual encounters in Portillo's past. Accusations flew that Clarke had only done so well because of tactical "stop Portillo" votes.

The deciding ballot of members between Clarke and Duncan Smith continued the bad feeling. Because it was a postal ballot that took place over several weeks, the candidates found themselves campaigning to people who had already voted. And the lack of up-to-date membership lists made contacting the members even harder. The process was very time consuming, and expensive (each candidate was allowed to, and did, spend £100,000). Attitude toward the EU seemed the deciding factor; Duncan Smith was sound on (i.e. opposed to) Europe, and beat the vastly more experienced Clarke with over 60% of the vote.

Duncan Smith, however, proved to be an unlucky (and, many argued, inept) leader, and the Conservatives failed to emerge from the electoral doldrums. Indeed, there was much talk that the resurgent Liberal Democrats under their popular leader Charles Kennedy would supplant the Conservatives as the main opposition to Tony Blair's Labour Party. After a poor by-election performance in Brent East in 2003 followed by a shambolic party conference (in which Duncan Smith made his much-derided remark "The quiet man [i.e. himself] is turning up the volume"), the Parliamentary party turned on him. Enough letters were received by the Chairman of the 1922 Committee to trigger a no-confidence motion, which Duncan Smith lost 90-75.

The extra-Parliamentary party got the blame for making a poor choice of leader in 2001, and Conservative MPs were keen to avoid a second bad-tempered drawn-out contest in two years as they languished in the polls. Furthermore, there was a great deal of speculation about the likely candidacy of David Davis, seen to be on the right of the party, who was popular and respected in some quarters (and widely expected to win any ballot of the grass roots), but very unpopular with some MPs.

Three reasons emerged to avoid a contest involving the grass roots. Some MPs wanted to settle the leadership question quickly. Some blamed the grass roots for a bad choice in 2001. Some thought the grass roots would elect Davis, and did not wish for that to happen. The only way to avoid a contest would be for MPs to coalesce around a single candidate, which they did: the experienced former Home Secretary Michael Howard, who had quit front-line politics in 1999 but returned to join Duncan Smith's front bench in 2001. Davis decided not to stand, and a contest was avoided. This was entirely within the rules, but the deliberate effect was to deny the grass roots a say.

Howard led the Conservatives to a third consecutive General Election defeat in 2005, and immediately announced his intention to retire after he had changed the electoral system. He clearly shared the view that the grass roots were too unreliable and out of touch to elect a sensible leader, and tasked Francis Maude to come up with an alternative system which reduced their influence. But Maude's system failed by a fraction to get the 60% support of the extra-Parliamentary party that was needed for a rule change. MPs were frustrated, but the 2005 contest would have to take place under the same set of rules.

To the surprise of many, the contest – which sprawled over seven months thanks to the attempt to change the rules – was relatively friendly. The key moment was during the party conference, when the long time front runner Davis made a speech judged as lacklustre, while David Cameron – at the time in third place in polls of MPs behind Davis and Clarke – made a fluent well-received speech without notes. By the end of the conference week, Cameron had become the favourite and remained comfortably in front.

The final ballot, of party members, was between Cameron and Davis; together they took part in eleven party hustings around the country, closed to the media, and a special edition of *Question Time*. The campaign changed very little, although it did allow Cameron and Davis, who did not know each other very well, to develop a friendly working relationship. Cameron won the ballot by a 2-1 majority.

There is still a question mark over the leadership rules even though the contest in 2005 was a success: why was 2001 a problem? Will the MPs feel obliged in future to refuse a contest, as they did in 2003?

One answer is to deny that the system actually changed much. Yes, the grass roots chose Duncan Smith, but if the system was at fault, we must argue that the MPs would have chosen someone else in 2001. This is highly debatable. The MPs rejected the compromise/unity candidate (Michael Ancram), the modernising candidate (David Davis) and the eurosceptic front-runner (Michael Portillo). It is hard to imagine pro-European Kenneth Clarke winning the leadership during those fraught times. Iain Duncan Smith is the only candidate left.

Nevertheless, there are clearly dangers in any system that allows one group of people to choose a leader and another to get rid of him or her. In 2001, 112 out of 166 Conservative MPs (67.5%) had not voted for Duncan Smith in the final ballot of MPs, and felt no consequent loyalty to him when he came under pressure. That situation, where the MPs split almost equally three ways, was peculiarly bad from that point of view, but such a division may well happen in the future, and it is very dangerous for any leader who does not receive the explicit support of a large number of MPs. MPs may well feel less commitment to someone they did not vote for (in fact, although 90 MPs voted for David Cameron in 2005, 108 voted against him – should he be worried?). By ensuring that the last ballot of MPs is a three-cornered contest, the system generates such risks.

It also seems to be the case that *perceptions* of the difficulties of the new rules have been significant. This was the reason why Davis was forced out of the contest in 2003, and the reason why Howard tried to change the rules in 2005 (if he had not tried to change the rules, the leadership would have been settled *before* the party conference which turned the tide in Cameron's favour).

Interestingly, those negative perceptions seem to have resulted in the modernisation effort in the Conservative Party being associated with the *reduction* of democracy – rather as happened with the reform of the Labour Party in the early 1990s. Normally, democracy and modernity are seen as going hand-in-hand, but when party leaders do not trust their members they diverge. The success of the 2005 contest for the Conservative leadership has reduced the pressure for change, but will the system survive another problematic election?

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