

Win or bust: the leadership gamble of William Hague

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Writing in 1977, Conservative MP Nigel Fisher identified ‘two qualifying conditions’ for Tory leaders: ‘a lengthy spell in Parliament and considerable Cabinet experience’. In combination, he thought these factors ‘make it unlikely that in future anyone will become leader of the party at an early age. There will be no more William Pitts’. Fisher’s timing could hardly have been more ironic. The 1977 Conservative Party conference saw the emergence of a new oratorical prodigy. As the delegates stood to applaud the sixteen-year-old William Hague, Lord Carrington whispered to his neighbour, ‘If he’s like that now, what on earth will he be like in 20 years time?’. ‘Michael Heseltine?’ quipped Norman St John-Stevas.¹

Twenty years after that exchange Heseltine had finally relinquished his fierce ambition to lead the Conservatives. Hague had only been in Parliament for eight years, and instead of ‘considerable Cabinet experience’ he had occupied the lowly office of Secretary of State for Wales only since July 1995. But he had been more fortunate than Heseltine – or at least that was how it seemed at the time of the 1997 party conference. At thirty-four he had become the youngest Tory Cabinet minister since Winston Churchill, and now he had been elected Conservative leader, beating Kenneth Clarke on the second ballot of his party’s MPs by ninety-two votes to seventy. Admittedly, the Younger Pitt had become Prime Minister at twenty-four, after learning the ropes as Chancellor of the Exchequer for just a year. But the comparison was made, although Hague’s unkind critics put their own spin on this, dubbing him ‘William Squitt’.

Fisher’s judgement is only one of many ill-fated generalisations about the nature of Tory leadership. The dictum that loyalty to a leader was the Conservative Party’s secret weapon was repeated so often that it lapsed into a cliché. But it had never been true. Before the advent of economic liberalism the Tory Party believed in hierarchy, so it was hardly a surprise that its members should place special emphasis on the leadership role. But the same doctrine suggested that when a leader seemed unequal to the exalted task, deposition could be regarded as a duty rather than a crime. Despite the

supposed sanctity of the office, almost all of the party's twentieth-century leaders were subjected to serious pressure or plotting. The introduction of leadership elections only formalised this tradition. Almost as soon as the rules were devised, in 1965, Alec Douglas-Home bowed to backbench opinion and resigned. Edward Heath was unceremoniously defenestrated in 1975, and his supplanter, Margaret Thatcher, suffered the same fate in 1990. When John Major submitted himself to re-election in 1995 he was hardly threatening to jump before he was pushed; he had been ushered towards an open window almost continuously since the 1992 general election. Instead of rallying around their figurehead – or even treating his plight with a modicum of sympathy – many Conservatives stepped up their disobedience at the first sight of Major's blood. One of his chief tormentors, Iain Duncan Smith, was rewarded after the 2001 general election, when he seized the crown himself. There was a precedent even for this: in 1922 Austen Chamberlain – the only twentieth-century leader besides Hague who never reached 10 Downing Street – was replaced by Andrew Bonar Law, who had wielded the knife against him.

On the basis of recent experience, at least, Conservative leaders are actually less secure than their Labour (or Liberal Democrat) counterparts, whether they are in opposition or in office. A general decline in deference throughout British society has affected them more than their rivals; in part, at least, this must be a product of the 'sturdy individualism' which so many party members now exhibit in practice and endorse in theory. Although some post-war Labour leaders were worried about faction-fighting to the point of paranoia, none of them left office as a direct result of party pressure. Hugh Gaitskell saw off challenges in 1960 and 1961 with surprising ease, considering that the party had suffered a demoralising election defeat on his watch. In fact, Gaitskell's record is comparable in some ways to that of Hague. After taking over from Clement Attlee in December 1955 he had almost four years to restore his party's fortunes from the position he inherited – an overall Conservative majority of fifty-eight. But after the 1959 general election the deficit between the government and the opposition parties had grown to 100 seats; Labour's tally had actually fallen by nineteen. When other factors are considered this was arguably a worse performance than the Conservatives in 2001. But while Gaitskell soldiered on, Hague hurriedly fell on his sword.

It is perfectly respectable to claim that the result in 2001 would have been the same whatever Hague had done. No one can be sure that the Conservatives would have fared better under a different leader – although it would have been interesting to see how Kenneth Clarke might have exploited the fuel crisis of September 2000. Equally, no one can argue that Hague was an electoral asset to his party. Throughout the Parliament he trailed his party in the opinion polls, sometimes by considerable margins. In April 2001 less than half of Conservative voters thought that their own leader would make the best Prime Minister – the figure for the electorate as a whole was 14 per

cent, and later it fell even further.² Whatever his impact on the result, seen from his own perspective the period of Hague's leadership was an almost unmitigated disaster. Probably the only silver lining was his marriage in December 1997, although some took a cynical view of this opportune visit from Cupid.

Hague's rivals in the 1997 leadership contest – Clarke, John Redwood, Peter Lilley and Michael Howard – were all at least ten years older than him, and although the vacancy left by Major was not necessarily the last throw of the dice for any of them they would have been foolish to avoid a contest at that time. By contrast, Hague could afford to be a spectator of this race. Given his relative youth, there was no need for him even to campaign on behalf of any of the candidates. Provided that he stood back and made emollient noises about everyone, he could expect a senior Shadow Cabinet post from the winner, whoever this turned out to be. While someone else had a go – and hopefully made a start on the task of taming what sometimes seemed to be an unleadable party – he could quietly build his reputation in advance of a challenge at some convenient moment over the next decade.

Reasons for running

Given the Tory Party's ruthlessness towards failed leaders, Hague's decision to stand in the unpropitious circumstances of 1997 requires some explanation. First, he could be forgiven for underestimating the challenges of the top job within his party, given his untroubled passage through the lower ranks. Even if memories of the 1977 speech had dogged Hague throughout his campaign in the 1989 Richmond by-election, his colleagues in the parliamentary party soon formed a different impression of him. Almost immediately he was recruited by the 'Third Term Group' of MPs which was based on friendship rather than ideology. He seemed as shrewd as he was clubbable. Norman Lamont, then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, picked him as his Parliamentary Private Secretary on the basis of advice from Lord Jopling – an excellent judge – and just one private conversation. Lamont had been warned that Hague was too young for such a responsible job, and for a relative newcomer to the Commons the challenge was redoubled when his boss became Chancellor of the Exchequer. But Hague proved to be competent and wholly reliable from the start. After 'Black Wednesday' there was no question that he would be sent into the wilderness with Lamont; and he excelled as a junior minister at the Department of Social Security from May 1993 to July 1995. As he prepared for his first Cabinet meeting as Secretary of State for Wales he could look back on an ascent which had been swift, but not unduly precipitate. A few years in a more prominent role would complete the uphill work, and also efface the public memory of the 'Tory Boy' speech which was still the only image that allowed the electorate to connect his face with a name.

At Wales, Hague won more admirers, although his predecessor John Redwood sneered that the ‘very old baby’ compromised too readily with pressure groups and allowed himself to be dominated by his civil servants.³ In fact by ruffling so many feathers during his own stint – and inviting public ridicule with his incompetent attempt to mime the words of the Welsh national anthem – Redwood had greatly simplified Hague’s task. He was not widely blamed when his party failed to win a single seat in Wales in the 1997 general election – another stroke of misleading luck for Hague.

Probably it was this run of good fortune which convinced Hague that he was already too prominent within the party to take on the role of interested bystander in this contest. According to his biographer, he had instantly calculated that he would win if he stood.⁴ But in the initial stages it looked as if he would throw in his lot with Howard. He was right to break off this connection almost before it had started; the mistake was to have entertained the unpromising proposal in the first place. Howard had offered him the post of Deputy Leader and the party chairmanship. The first of these was of doubtful advantage, and the second was a positive menace. If the party did well at the next election Howard would have taken most of the credit, leaving him well placed to run for another parliamentary term at least. If it underperformed, Chairman Hague would have made a convenient scapegoat.

Hague’s well-founded conviction that the leadership was his for the taking was heavily influenced by the knowledge that two powerful rivals – Heseltine and Michael Portillo – were out of the reckoning. Another key consideration was that he had fewer enemies than any of his potential rivals. Actually his sudden emergence as a promising dark horse in the race should have made him think twice before entering the stalls. He was acceptable to so many of his colleagues because unlike the other candidates he had not alienated either wing of his divided party. This had been the main attraction of Major back in 1990 – hardly an auspicious precedent for Hague. Redwood’s supporters underlined the resemblance during the leadership campaign, referring to Hague as ‘John Major with A levels’.⁵ Whatever their personal qualities, both men only prospered in the middle of the road because they were relatively unexposed; longer service in the top ranks would almost certainly have confronted them with an issue which would have forced them to side openly with one Euro-faction or the other.

Any remaining feeling that Hague was jumping the gun with this early challenge seems to have been dispelled by some excitable friends (a recurrent theme in this story). Given the fate of recent Tory leaders, the decision to run placed Hague among those party members who saw Labour’s victory – or at least its unprecedented extent – as something of a freak. Obviously he had confidence in his own abilities, but a respectable Conservative comeback also depended on other factors. Even if New Labour proved as incompetent in office as sanguine Tories expected, Hague was staking everything on a

run of adverse publicity for a government whose media machine had won his (undeserved) admiration. And he also needed the 1997 Liberal Democrat surge – fuelled by tactical voting which looked likely to become even more popular – to stop dead. In short, he needed to perform abnormally well, and everyone else to flop badly, if he were even to claw back a sufficient proportion of Labour's lead to make it worthwhile continuing the fight.

Personnel mismanagement

Thus it could be predicted in advance that the circumstances which helped Hague to the top might push him down without a spectacular run of good luck. But he was genuinely unlucky with the Portillo factor. There was always a chance that 'the Future of the Right' (as his admiring biographer had prematurely hailed him⁶) would return to the Commons when a suitable vacancy arose. What Hague could not anticipate was that Alan Clark would die in September 1999 and present Portillo with a seat which was both high profile and ultra-safe, ensuring that his campaign would inspire comparisons between the candidate and the man who had taken the position which had looked to be reserved for him before Stephen Twigg intervened in May 1997.

The real nightmare scenario would have arisen had Portillo won a by-election in a Labour marginal – however unlikely that prospect was for any representative of a party which had failed to gain a seat since 1982. But the contest in Kensington and Chelsea, with all its attendant circumstances, was almost as bad for Hague. After Portillo returned to the Commons the leader and his aides worked themselves up unnecessarily over trivial (and imagined) slights. But it was always going to be difficult to cope with a colleague who had already inspired something of a personality cult within the party, even before he began his personal epiphany after his shock defeat at Enfield, Southgate. And once Portillo was installed as Shadow Chancellor it was always likely that he would use his authority to revise or abandon at least some of the policies he inherited. So Hague had to retreat from pledges with which he was closely identified: on the minimum wage, an independent central bank and the guarantee that taxes would fall as a proportion of national income over the next Parliament.

Despite occasional attempts to appear relaxed in Portillo's company, Hague's resentment was all too obvious. His maladroit handling of the reshuffle which accommodated Portillo in the Shadow Cabinet revealed the extent to which the comeback had caught him off-balance. Hague had managed to offend both Francis Maude, who was moved sideways to shadow Foreign Affairs, and John Maples, who was dropped as a result. This was only one example of Hague's miscalculations over enemies and friends. Perhaps he had no alternative but to sack Viscount Cranborne for insubordination in December 1998. But Cranborne had negotiated an excellent

compromise over House of Lords reform – a deal, furthermore, which could have been very embarrassing to Blair – and he had only felt compelled to work behind his leader’s back because his position was opposed by Shadow Ministers who had very limited expertise on this issue. His peremptory dismissal of Cranborne – a widely respected figure – presented an interesting contrast to the fate of Jeffrey Archer. Even without the warnings of Sir Timothy Kitson and Michael Crick, Hague should have known that Archer was an impossible candidate for London Mayor – but that if he sought the party’s nomination he would win it. Obviously Hague had to say something on Archer’s behalf once the selection-process was over; but he made the worst of a bad job by applauding the candidate’s ‘integrity’. And after messing up over Archer, Hague promptly compounded his crime by antagonising the obvious substitute, Steven Norris.⁷

Hague has even less excuse for his treatment of other senior figures. Like Sir Walter Raleigh in *1066 And All That*, many of his old Cabinet colleagues were despatched for the offence of being left over from the last reign. Talent was not so plentiful on the Tory benches that people like Redwood, Howard, Lilley and Gillian Shephard could safely be evicted in one fell swoop; after all, neither Clarke, Heseltine (nor Major himself) could be recalled to the colours. If the purged politicians were judged guilty by association with failure, Hague himself was not free from the taint. Hague’s media supremo Amanda Platell is said to have rated the original frontbenchers ‘as dreary second-raters’; but their replacements were either unknown to the public, or all too prominent, like Portillo.⁸ Hague seemed an isolated figure by the time of his resignation, and this was at least in part because so many of his best-known colleagues had left the front bench. Before his election Hague had proved himself to be a good team-player, with nothing of the loner in his personal make-up; but his decisions on personnel helped to ensure an excessive and unwelcome concentration on himself during the 2001 election campaign. This would have been a problem anyway, since most commentators expected a comfortable Labour victory and were inevitably tempted to speculate about Hague’s own position after the election. But the situation was a sharp contrast to 1970, when Edward Heath had led a well-known supporting cast of Shadow Ministers who could share the spotlight. On that occasion only Enoch Powell of the party’s heavyweights had been missing.

The overall impression of Hague’s dealings with colleagues of stature is one of insecurity. He seemed happiest with his small coterie of over-protective intimates, notably Platell, his youthful private secretary, George Osborne, and his Chief of Staff, Sebastian Coe. He demonstrated his capacity for unyielding loyalty where they were concerned, as if to compensate for his ruthlessness in discarding weightier colleagues. Although Hague was unlikely to heed Teresa Gorman when she urged him to spend less time with Coe (compared by the maverick MP to ‘a parrot on your shoulder’⁹), he must

have realised that he would be damaged by the impression that his closest confidants were people who owed their standing in the party entirely to his favour and friendship. Tales of Hague's feats with Coe on the judo mat could only have improved his image if the public respected him already. As it was, they inspired as much ridicule as Hague's naive revelation of preternatural drinking prowess. There was always a feeling that Hague's team was obsessed by his negative poll ratings, and were willing to try anything to change them. But Heath had been less popular than his party for most of the 1966–70 Parliament, and this had not prevented a Conservative victory. If the media had decided that Hague was a loser – exemplified in the *Sun's* portrayal of him as a dead parrot – the only way to persuade them otherwise was to wait for a suitable opportunity to showcase his 'statesmanlike' qualities.

The Hague entourage performed abysmally over Maude and Portillo. They were old friends, and despite the botched reshuffle nothing had happened to break their existing alliance. But Hague's circle interpreted their continuing amity as a symptom of conspiracy – the itch to copy New Labour was so rampant with them that they talked wildly of secret pacts cemented in high-class restaurants – and the overt hostility was the surest way of making a reality of their fears. Some of Hague's early decisions – the photo-call at the Notting Hill Carnival, his antics in a baseball cap at an amusement park, and his backing for a short-lived campaign to rename Heathrow Airport after Diana, Princess of Wales – were attributed to the urgings of others. At best, this only underlined the impression that Hague had an erratic judgement both of people and of advice. His choice of Cecil Parkinson as his first Party Chairman was one of his few successes; despite his anxiety to emulate Labour's 'modernisers' and make all things new, he had the nous to exploit Parkinson's experience and his popularity at Central Office. But Parkinson was yoked uncomfortably with Archie Norman, whose success in the Asda supermarket chain was far less suitable than he thought for reviving the organisation of a venerable political party. In his obsession with New Labour, Norman outranked even Hague himself.

Since Hague's dealings with his colleagues have been chronicled in undignified detail – including what are purported to be verbatim accounts in Simon Walters' *Tory Wars* – possibly in hindsight his record looks worse than it really was. But at the time it seemed bad enough. Especially after the advent of Portillo, his image always seemed to be projected against a background of bickering. On this front, at least, his leadership gamble had backfired for predictable reasons. He had not earned enough authority over his parliamentary colleagues (let alone the public) to prepare the ground for a successful leadership. Again, the example of John Major should have been instructive here. Perhaps Hague thought that the people who had made Major's period in office so difficult had all defected to the Referendum Party in 1997. In fact they were more likely to have stayed with the Conservatives

for another round of blood-letting; despairing moderates were far more likely to leave. Hague himself had shown back in 1977 that the Tories loved a bit of *lese-majeste*. Yet, although his reforms gave ordinary members more of the appearance than the reality of power (see Chapter 5), these gestures to appease grass roots activists were never balanced by a concerted attempt to exert his authority as leader. The overall impression is that of someone for whom events just moved too fast from the moment that he decided to spurn Howard's pact.

Problems with policy

One of the few advantages of opposition is the chance it offers for a renewal of party thinking. But, if anything, Hague's record on policy looks even less impressive than his dealings with colleagues. Despite the internal reforms, policy making was still dominated by the frontbench team, and by the leader in particular. By the time of the 2001 general election Hague's penchant for populist announcements had earned him a new derisive nickname – 'Billy Bandwagon'.

But it had all looked far more promising at the outset. The 1997 party conference was dominated by Hague's decision to exclude the possibility that Britain would join the single currency, at least during the ensuing Parliament. This time Hague was unlucky because everything went misleadingly well in the short term. The policy was rejected by Clarke, Heseltine and other pro-Europeans; Ian Taylor, David Curry and Stephen Dorrell left the Shadow Cabinet in response. But their protests merely drew attention to their lack of support within the party, and that tended to be the story picked up by the media. Hague's decision was nicely calculated to appease the troublesome Euro-sceptics, and maybe to entice some 1997 defectors back to the fold on the (doubtful) assumption that the Referendum Party had cost the Conservatives dearly. An overwhelming vote of support in an unprecedented party ballot consolidated Hague's tactical success. In the early stages of his general election campaign in May 2001 he was confident enough in his policy to risk ridicule by holding up a pound coin, imploring his audience to join him in a last-ditch effort to 'save' a piece of metal which was itself of fairly recent provenance.

The immediate response of Hague's critics was that he was trying to dupe the electorate into thinking that the referendum promised by Labour was a foregone conclusion. This in itself was a wounding argument, which exposed Hague's secret fear that the election would prove to be his own last chance to campaign on the euro. But the problem was even worse than this. Intoxicated by the apparent success of his policy in calming the more hysterical spirits on his right wing, Hague seems to have forgotten that his compromise was vulnerable to logical analysis. Why had he ruled out the

euro for just one Parliament? Was he opposed to a single currency in principle, or might he embrace it in certain circumstances? If the latter, he seemed to be saying that these circumstances could not arise in the next five-year period – or that if everything did come right after all, he would deliberately miss the moment. If the former, why on earth did he not rule out the euro forever? In the end the piece of metal was almost irrelevant to the choices of voters in the general election. But Hague's discomfort produced one of the most telling moments of his election campaign, when his position was picked apart by Jeremy Paxman in a BBC *Newsnight* interview. Hague had been badly roughed-up by Paxman in the wake of the Cranborne sacking, and ever since then he had refused to join battle a second time. Since *Newsnight* had featured interviews with all the party leaders, Hague could not refuse forever – and at the first touch of Paxman's scalpel he suddenly looked tired and beaten.

Since his resignation, Hague has been widely criticised for basing his election campaign on the single currency, rather than the public services. Since his party had spent the whole of the previous decade talking about little else, he should not be judged too harshly for this. The mistake, no doubt, was to overrate the Conservative victory in the European Parliament election of June 1999. The turnout for that poll had been miserable; rather than flocking to the Tories disillusioned Labour voters had abstained in what they regarded as an inconsequential contest. But at least the opinion polls favoured the Conservatives on this issue; and if voters had yet to share Hague's own urgency over the euro a barnstorming campaign might shake their complacency (just as Heath's warnings about the economy seem to have registered with a rush just before the 1970 election). In any case, throughout the Parliament the Conservatives had struggled on domestic issues. At the election their disarray was underlined when a Treasury spokesman, Oliver Letwin, divulged his hopes of slashing public spending by £20 billion. The party's official wish list added up to savings of around £8 billion, and Labour was happily attacking even that. Although Tory sums were regarded as irrelevant by the electorate – who knew there was no chance that they would form a government – Letwin's dissent would have been extremely damaging during a normal election. Hague cannot be faulted for refusing to sack Letwin, who mysteriously disappeared for a while after his gaffe. But the incident would have made the party look shambolic even if it had not been faced by an organisation with an iron grip over its candidates; and Hague must take much of the blame for allowing this state of affairs to develop.

Hague's only chance of making headway on the public services had disappeared in April 1999, when Peter Lilley tried to move the party away from its Thatcherite past. Polling had revealed the obvious: the Tories were distrusted on the key areas of health and education. The only way to allay public fears was to moderate the free market rhetoric. But at the time of

Lilley's speech the ideological running within the party was being set by Hague's friend Alan Duncan – an extreme libertarian whose views on a range of subjects would have shocked Lady Thatcher herself. Since he was responsible for policy research Lilley felt that he should clear the ground for new thinking. When he discussed the speech with his leader, Hague raised no objections to what was a moderate and thoughtful text. But hawkish Shadow Cabinet colleagues, including Howard, Duncan Smith and Ann Widdecombe, were alarmed. Unfortunately for Hague and Lilley, functionaries within the party leaked the speech in advance, and spin-doctors grossly exaggerated the extent of Lilley's heresy. Possibly the grass-roots response was over-dramatised, too. The idea that ordinary members were outraged because the speech coincided with a party to celebrate the anniversary of Mrs Thatcher's first general election victory seems preposterous – unless the individuals concerned were Shadow Cabinet members who had spoken to a 'ballistic' Thatcher at the party. But Hague apparently contemplated resignation in the aftermath of Lilley's speech; the policy supremo himself rapidly returned to the backbenches.¹⁰

In Thatcher's shadow

Hague had good reason to be petrified of Thatcher, who during the leadership campaign had saddled him with what was perhaps the least welcome endorsement in British political history. Although an intervention from her was certain to remind the wider public of the Conservative legacy they had just rejected at the polls, a gently supportive letter in *The Times* might have helped Hague's bid among the leadership electorate – the rump of Tory MPs who had survived the 1997 general election. Unfortunately Thatcher's message was disseminated much further. Stomping around in front of the cameras, she assured the people that Hague would 'follow the kind of government I did'. She kept repeating the name of her little-known champion, giving the impression that she might forget it herself without coaching her memory (in fact, after meeting Hague she had still felt it necessary to ask Redwood the vital question: 'Is he right wing?').¹¹ Previously she had helped to hamstring Major by styling herself a 'backseat driver' before her successor had the chance to prove himself. This time Hague stood beside his voluble patroness with a fixed smile. Possibly at the time he did not realise that the photo-opportunity had rebounded, but he was well aware of Thatcher's destructive capabilities by the time of her 'The Mummy Returns' speech during the 2001 election campaign. His own weakness at the time of Lilley's speech had left him exposed to that unpleasant resurrection, at any time of Thatcher's choosing.¹²

The spectacular return of 'The Mummy' in person was not strictly necessary; her spirit had been directing from the passenger-seat ever since Lilley's speech. Thatcher remained an icon for 'core' Conservative voters, and

an albatross for the leadership. There was no agreed change of strategy after April 1999; party planners still hoped to reach out to uncommitted voters, as well as dragging out the faithful. But in Hague himself there was an unmistakable change of emphasis. Possibly he would have tried to exploit the same issues – the Tony Martin shooting, for example, chimed in with his deep-rooted sense that an Englishman's home is his gun emplacement – but his abrasive, unapologetic tone must have been inspired by a feeling that all this would play very well with the core constituency – the people who still needed to be convinced that he was a fit successor for Thatcher. The Conservative victory in the European election, within two months of Lilley's speech, seemed to confirm that this core vote was at least more reliable than Blair's disparate support; but, as we have seen, there were obvious reasons for treating this result with great caution.

It seems that Hague was now hoping to play to two different audiences – to retain the hearts of the faithful, while wooing the uncommitted – without realising that the first tactic would have nullified the second. To appease the right wing of the party Hague had to do more than simply voice 'populist' concerns; he had to seize on them with the fervour which they associated with their heroine. Thus, while no opposition leader would have spurned the chance to make some capital out of the fuel protests, Hague gave the impression of endorsing actions which endangered emergency services across the country. His 'foreign land' speech of March 2001 was widely interpreted as the culmination of a campaign against 'bogus' asylum seekers. In fact Hague had used the phrase in the context of Europe, but it still seemed that one of his speech-writers had been pillaging the works of Enoch Powell. From the conflicting reports, it seems that Tory 'spin-doctors' were themselves divided as to his real meaning. Some observers had hinted at an element of xenophobia in Hague from the outset; after the leadership election a letter in *The Times* had claimed that 'the Tory Party in Parliament has chosen a rather querulous little Englander'.¹³ After the speech it was hardly a surprise that the outgoing Tory MP John Townend should make overtly racist comments – or that Hague's response to that outburst was hesitant (unlike his instant dismissal of Lord Cranborne for being too clever by half).

Possibly Hague's most irresponsible action was his attack on the 'liberal elite' after the Macpherson Report had accused the Metropolitan Police of 'institutional racism'. It was perfectly valid – indeed potentially useful – for him to make sceptical noises. But the cliché 'liberal elite' was a substitute for an argument, rather than a useful tool for a constructive debate. Hague's reaction to the Report was sure to win applause from those who thought that the 'chattering classes' (or the 'politically correct') should be deported along with the blacks. But these voters tended to be concentrated in seats where the Tories were safe anyway. In the London Mayoral election of May 2000 Steve Norris had performed creditably on a platform which acknowledged

the very different outlook of urban voters, but, since Norris had distanced himself from the national party, strategists seem to have regarded this precedent as embarrassing rather than instructive. The Conservative defeat at the Romsey by-election on the same night as the Mayoral election should have alerted them to the dangers of their present strategy.

Hague has also been heavily criticised for his opposition to the repeal of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act. The original legislation had proved unworkable: it had only been introduced in the first place as a sop to right-wing opinion. Hague himself had voted to reduce the age of homosexual consent to sixteen, and in one early interview he even refused to disown the idea of gay marriage.¹⁴ But his refusal to change his party's policy on Section 28 was perfectly explicable. He was caught in a double bind. If he had any doubts about the popularity of Section 28 on the right wing of his party, the short-lived cult which sprang up around his combative Home Affairs spokesperson, Ann Widdecombe, will have disabused him. On his other flank, Portillo's confessional speeches, and the passionate advocacy of reform by Norris and others, demanded a cultural transformation of the Conservative Party, even more radical than New Labour's acceptance of market forces.

In the abstract, it might have been possible (and advantageous) for Hague himself to have steered a middle course between these positions. But the depth of feeling among his unrepresentative activists forced him off the fence; and as usual he chose the 'traditionalist' course. He had every reason to admire the institution of the family; after all, by all accounts he seems to have come from a very happy one. But some of his comments – for example, his expression of thanks to religious leaders who opposed Section 28 – were unnecessary genuflections to reactionary opinion. The electoral damage caused by this policy in itself can be exaggerated; whatever Portillo and his admirers might think, the Tories could hardly make a convincing pitch against Labour and the Liberal Democrats for support among minority groups. But there was an immediate cost. The dissenting Tory MP Shaun Woodward was first sacked as a Shadow spokesman, and then defected to Labour, renewing the impression that the party was divided. More damaging was the general impression, that the Conservatives and their leader were determined to look backwards to a mythical time of social conformity. Even a grudging acceptance of diversity would have been better than a rhetorical line which made it less likely that the party could broaden its appeal even in the next Parliament.

Hague's 'political philosophy'

The fact that Woodward was informed of his fate by pager (another telling contrast to the treatment of Townend) suggests that Hague was uneasy with the position he had been forced to take. The power of the right-wing 'core'

constituency – and the ultimate futility of bidding for its lasting affection – is attested to by the impression that Hague himself seemed to be relatively free from prejudice. Although he did not add his name to the eight Shadow Ministers who revealed in October 2000 that they had used soft drugs, some of his friends since university days had enjoyed the sort of ‘experimental’ lifestyles deplored by many Tory activists. In a speech at Bradford just before the election he sounded sincere when he claimed that: ‘It has never mattered to me whether people are Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Jewish, white, black, or Asian.’ But by this time the ‘foreign land’ speech had been supplemented by Lady Thatcher’s attack on multiculturalism. Far from reaching out to remaining floating voters, Hague’s appeal was only likely to confuse existing Conservative supporters. The same was true of his last-minute warnings of another Labour landslide.¹⁵

When Hague resigned the Conservative leadership straight after the election, he claimed that: ‘I believe strongly, passionately, in everything I’ve fought for.’¹⁶ Given his various changes – enforced or otherwise – that was a pardonable exaggeration. But insofar as the remark did convey a general truth, it underlined Hague’s complacency about the status of ‘conservatism’ in 2001. His attempts to characterise his own views tended to be unenlightening: ‘Supporting those who do the right thing is at the heart of my political philosophy’, he once declared. Jo-Anne Nadler has identified his ‘core themes’ as ‘freedom, national independence, self reliance, responsibility and enterprise’.¹⁷ The list closely resembles the values of American Republicanism. Perhaps in the USA Hague’s values do resemble those of the ‘mainstream majority’; but the USA remains a ‘foreign land’ to most of the British, and in the domestic context much more work was needed to weave these ideas into a convincing ‘narrative’. In particular, Hague seemed quite satisfied that the electorate shared his own antipathy towards the state. Just conceivably, a majority could have been brought to agree with this as a general principle. But as Tony Blair had noted, they would give a different answer in the specific (and crucial) instances of education and health.

Whether or not Hague’s personal creed could ever be fleshed out into a coherent policy programme remains an open question. At the time of writing, Duncan Smith is fighting Labour from a similar standpoint, and it is too early to judge whether his party will ever square its tax-cutting rhetoric with a reassuring message on public services. Hague himself seems to have laboured under an additional handicap. From the position he inherited in 1997 it always made sense to eschew detailed policies as far as possible. The point was to come up with one or two eye-catching ideas which were invulnerable to Labour counter-thrusts. Once these attractive policies had been devised they should have been ring-fenced, and the message hammered home as often as possible. As we have seen, Hague was forced to abandon some of his key commitments. But others seem to have been picked up, ‘market-tested’, then

jettisoned when the Tory poll rating refused to budge from its ‘flatline’ of around 30 per cent. The inadequacies of management consultancy as an apprenticeship for politics might also be detected in Hague’s attitude to slogans. Some of these – ‘compassionate’ or ‘Kitchen Table’ Conservatism, the *Common Sense Revolution*, *Believing in Britain*, and even ‘Mainstream Majority’ – were worth a sustained trial. But Hague always seemed to be looking around for a winning soundbite, when his priority from the start should have been survival, not victory. The net result was that his sales-pitch to the electorate seemed even less coherent than it really was.

Oddly enough, Hague’s most creditable performance in the policy field was his handling of the most intractable problem – the legacy of eighteen years of Tory rule. The opposition was probably right to cease its morale-sapping apologies after the first couple of years. Even so, some of its later attempts to switch the blame to Labour were horribly premature. For example, on the National Health Service one policy document stated that: ‘The politicians have moved in and common sense has flown out of the window.’ Perhaps so; but the greatest meddlers had been Conservatives (Sir Keith Joseph in the Heath government, and almost every Health Secretary from 1979 to 1997). On this issue the Tory left (in the shape of Clarke) shared the guilt with orthodox Thatcherites, so for once ‘sorry’ really might have been the hardest word.¹⁸

Probably Hague will always be remembered best for his performances at Prime Minister’s Question Time. His biographer – whose portrait is certainly no hagiography – has claimed that his debating skills ‘would have made him a giant in a nineteenth century context’.¹⁹ One still feels that Charles James Fox and Gladstone might have held their own against him. In our very different era Blair was sometimes discomfited, despite his careful preparations and the orchestrated baying from packed Labour benches. But Hague’s sallies had little impact outside the House, and for good reason. Prime Minister’s Questions continued to fascinate Westminster commentators, but to almost everyone else they merely fostered disrespect for politicians. In any case, if Blair was vulnerable in the sound-bite battle over many issues, the key objective for Hague was to build public confidence in the Tory alternative; and in this he palpably failed.

Conclusion

A negative verdict on the Hague leadership is unavoidable, and while in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 election it would have seemed like kicking an essentially good man when he is down, at the time of writing Hague is well into his rehabilitation, making self-deprecating speeches and researching a book on Pitt the Younger. Any argument advanced by his defenders can be parried by the central fact – that he seized the leadership when a period

of tactful silence would have been far more helpful to his burning ambition of one day emulating Pitt. He was never given a fair chance by the media, but his premature bid denied him the chance to live down his unfortunate image, and he could easily have avoided his counter-productive early photo opportunities. The criticism of his sober reaction to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales was grossly unfair; but having sounded the appropriate note Hague should have stuck to it. Instead, he over-reacted, apparently fearing that Blair's ostentatious emoting had caught a public mood which would last long after the funeral. He was far from being the only Conservative to tremble before Labour's supposed mastery of 'spin'; but that merely reinforces the central point, that if he rated his enemies so highly he should have bided his time until their limitations had been exposed.

Lord Parkinson in this volume rightly praises Hague's reorganisation of his party. But this turned out to be the easy part of his challenge. Those who had stayed loyal despite the 1997 meltdown were always likely to be mollified by the impression that their opinions would count for more in future. The real difficulty was to recapture the enthusiasm of the voters who had deserted over the five years since 1992. This would have been a daunting task for any Conservative leader; but the manner of Hague's failure suggests a second fatal misjudgement – an inadequate grasp of the real reasons for the landslide defeat. The new leader seemed blind to the possibility that the voters had turned against the ideas which had fired him since his schooldays – even though there was plenty of objective evidence that the majority had never endorsed them in the first place. This was a monumental error from someone embarking on a gamble: it was as if he was staking everything on a favourite horse, without troubling to glance at its recent form. And even if Hague can be pardoned for exaggerating the attractions of his party's ideology, he even failed to tackle the most obvious of the superficial reasons for the 1997 result. He had good reason to remember Major's problems with disunity; but although he managed the European issue with reasonable success as far as his party was concerned, he relied far too much on inexperienced confidants and caused unnecessary friction among his senior colleagues.

Any judgement of a political leader has to be based on a delicate thought-experiment. One is forced to compare the actual record with two hypothetical scenarios – what an imaginary 'average' leader might have been expected to do, and what the actual leader might have achieved, based on his or her qualities and a realistic assessment of the available options. The resulting yardsticks are unlikely to coincide in every respect, and even the wary commentator can easily slip from one to the other. But in resigning immediately after the 2001 general election, Hague seems to have tacitly accepted that he had let himself down so badly that even the 'average' leader could have done better.

The highest compliment that can be paid to William Hague is that he

was right to be so disappointed. Determination, a sense of humour and an impenetrable skin are all essential attributes for a successful Tory leader nowadays; and the fact that Hague's debating skills were no great help to his party should not obscure the intellectual powers which underlay them. Actually his greatest strength was only dimly reflected in those Commons performances. His resilience was truly amazing; and although this undoubtedly helped him at the dispatch box it had advantages across the board. Sometimes he allowed himself to wonder whether he should have delayed his leadership challenge for a few years, but he was capable of banishing such thoughts and plugging on, in the face of opinion polls and media jibes which might have made even Sisyphus stop pushing.

This represents an impressive list of qualities for a political leader. It will never be known whether Hague possessed any of the others – or whether he could have acquired them through a longer apprenticeship, finally putting the 'Tory Boy' image to rest. The other thing we learned about him – the fact that he was a dignified loser – might have earned him respect, but is surplus to the requirements of one-shot gamblers like Hague. For them it is 'win or bust'; posthumous popularity earned by a graceful retirement speech can be no consolation to them. But at least Hague's decision means that he has the advantage of Pitt the Younger in one respect. While the latter found it impossible to abandon the game of politics and died, exhausted, at forty-six, Hague has followed through the logic of his ill-fated gamble, and opted for a prosperous and relaxing retirement.

Notes

- 1 N. Fisher, *The Tory Leaders: Their Struggle for Power* (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), p. 9; S. Hoggart, *On the House* (London, Robson Books, 1981), p. 112.
- 2 A. Travis, 'Poll shows Tory voters' faith in Hague is slipping', *Guardian*, 24 April 2001.
- 3 H. Williams, *Guilty Men: Conservative Decline and Fall 1992–1997* (London, Aurum Press, 1998), p. 189.
- 4 J.-A. Nadler, *William Hague: In His Own Right* (London, Politico's, 2000), p. 8.
- 5 Williams, *Guilty Men*, pp. 188 and 125.
- 6 M. Gove, *Michael Portillo: The Future of the Right* (London, Fourth Estate, 1995).
- 7 For Hague's handling of the Mayoral election, see M. D'Arcy and R. Maclean, *Nightmare! The Race to Become London's Mayor* (London, Politico's, 2000), Ch. 5.
- 8 S. Walters, *Tory Wars: Conservatives in Crisis* (London, Politico's, 2001), p. 17.
- 9 T. Gorman, *No, Prime Minister!* (London, John Blake, 2001), p. 345.
- 10 Nadler, *William Hague*, pp. 268–9; Walters, *Tory Wars*, p. 117.
- 11 Williams, *Guilty Men*, p. 198.
- 12 Nadler, *William Hague*, p. 40.
- 13 See A. Cooper, 'A party in a foreign land', in E. Vaizey, N. Boles and M. Grove (eds), *A Blue Tomorrow* (London, Politico's, 2001), p. 28, note 20; letter from Mr M. Dunn, *The Times*, 21 June 1997.
- 14 Cooper, 'A party in a foreign land', p. 19.

- 15 P. Wintour, 'Millbank gets poll jitters over landslide warning', *Guardian*, 2 June 2001.
- 16 A. Perkins, 'How secret poll target doomed Hague to the political wilderness', *Guardian*, 9 June 2001.
- 17 W. Hague, 'The moral case for low taxation', speech to Politeia, London, 14 March 2000; Nadler, *William Hague*, pp. 35–6.
- 18 *Believing in Britain* (London, Conservative Party, 2000), p. 11.
- 19 *Believing in Britain* p. 20.