The 2001 general election: so, no change there then?

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A week is a long time in politics, as former Prime Minister Harold Wilson once noted. A year can seem like an eternity, especially when a party makes negligible progress in advance of a second successive general election drubbing. To follow such a humiliation with an occasionally bitter and long drawn out leadership contest – in which one candidate calls the other an ‘extremist’,¹ and the other retorts by dubbing his opponent ‘a right wing hanger and flogger’² – provides incontrovertible evidence of a party in turmoil.

For these reasons, amongst others considered elsewhere in this volume, the current state of the Conservative Party remains one of inherent and considerable interest as the party slowly mounts a recovery effort under Iain Duncan Smith. There appears, at last, to be a degree of recognition within the party leadership at least that the terrain of successful electoral politics in Britain has changed radically since the halcyon days for the party in the 1980s. With a very different terrain, the need for a very different route map inevitably arises. Duncan Smith will have to force through major changes in the way in which the Conservative Party presents itself to the electorate if he is to restore the party’s credibility and reputation. In this task, he will need to show much more imagination and commitment to the process of substantive change than his predecessor, William Hague, who flirted with the requirements of the process but too briefly and too superficially.

The enforced retirement from public life of Margaret Thatcher in March 2002 provides Duncan Smith with a vital opportunity (denied to Hague) to move on by acknowledging the legacy of Thatcherism in the 1980s, but grappling simultaneously with the existence of a radically different socio-political context. Such a context has been shaped and sustained by the electoral success of the Labour Party in 1997 and 2001. The context has also been guided in practical terms by the instincts of Tony Blair as a leader in control both of his party and of the country at large, even if a lack of open enthusiasm for his efforts has increasingly characterised public perceptions. But this does not necessarily make the task of the opposition any easier.³

At the Conservative spring conference in March 2001, Hague had made

his widely criticised 'foreign land' speech that seemed a tacit admission of impending electoral defeat, in its failure to make any attempt at widening Conservative Party support beyond its 'core'. Allegedly focusing upon the future relationship between Britain and Europe, the speech was instead widely interpreted as a coded pandering to Conservative loyalists on questions of asylum seekers and race.

In sharp contrast, Duncan Smith's speech at the 2002 spring conference attracted conditional and partial praise from some unlikely sources,⁴ as a step in the right direction of setting out a broader, more inclusive Conservatism with a better chance of being effective in challenging the overall record in office of the second Blair administration.

This chapter will consider the second successive Conservative election defeat in 2001 in the light of the previous four years of the party attempting to adjust to the first landslide mauling of 1997. Given the striking similarities in outcome between the two elections of 1997 and 2001, it might be tempting to assume a case of 'no change'. In some ways, the task facing the new Conservative leader were indeed the same as those which confronted his predecessor, but Duncan Smith at least had more widespread willingness within the party to enact substantive change than Hague was ever able to muster. It was inevitably very difficult indeed for party activists and sympathisers to comprehend the Conservatives' rapid fall from political grace, when the party had largely dominated the British political landscape throughout the twentieth century.⁵

However, even given this more favourable context, the sheer electoral arithmetic and the unavoidable approach to re-gaining national power, based on a genuine re-appraisal of what the party stands for, is certainly similar both in magnitude and in the inherent difficulties involved in actually succeeding.

The 2001 general election

The raw statistics of the 2001 general election paint a stark picture of the parlous electoral state of the Conservative Party. Overall, the party made a net gain of just one seat (up from 165 to 166), gaining nine seats, but losing eight. In three of those nine gains, the Conservative majority is less than 1,000 votes.

Hague's position as leader was thus untenable, and he resigned the following morning. His exact target for net seat gains in order to stay on as party leader was never revealed, but it was widely felt to be a minimum of thirty net gains, with a hope of gaining roughly fifty seats.⁶ Much more optimistic scenarios envisaged cutting Labour's 1997 overall majority of 179 in half, to somewhere between 70 and 100 seats.

The Conservatives in fact won 31.7 per cent of the vote, their second

worst result since 1832, following on from the previous trough of 1997. The Labour–Conservative swing was 1.8 per cent in favour of the latter, but a national swing of 11.6 per cent was needed for Hague to ensure that he avoided the unfortunate fate of being only the second Conservative leader not to become Prime Minister.

Highly variable swing in particular key marginal seats further undermined the notion of uniform national swing. Whilst the Conservatives performed well in south Essex, regaining Romford from Labour with a swing of 9 per cent, smaller swings to the party only reduced Labour’s majority rather than winning back the seat (as in Birmingham Perry Barr and Barking). In addition, Labour often performed relatively well in seats it had first won in 1997 such as Birmingham Edgbaston, Enfield Southgate and Harrow West. In seats which the party already held, the Conservative vote share rose by an average of 2.6 per cent but it only rose by 0.17 per cent in Labour-held seats. The Conservative vote actually fell by 0.15 per cent in seats held by the Liberal Democrats.⁷

In 1997, the Conservatives ended up with no seats in either Scotland or Wales. In 2001, they gained one seat in Scotland from the SNP (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale), although very narrowly with a majority of just seventy-four votes. The party still finished in overall fourth place in Scotland behind the Liberal Democrats for the first time. The Conservatives won 15.6 per cent of the vote in Scotland compared to 16.3 per cent for the Liberal Democrats. Once more, the Conservatives failed to win any seats in Wales, despite winning 21.0 per cent of the vote and remaining the second most popular party behind Labour (which won 48.6 per cent).

Table 11.1 The 2001 general election

Party	Vote		Change	Seats	
	2001 (%)	1997 (%)		2001	1997
Con.	31.7	30.7	+1.0	166	165 (+1)
Labour	40.7	43.2	−2.5	412	418 (−6)
Liberal Democrats	18.2	16.8	+1.4	52	46 (+6)
Others	9.4	10.3	−0.9	29	30 (−1)

Source: Adapted from Electoral Commission, *Election 2001. The Official Results* (London: Politico’s Publishing, 2001).

The 2001 election outcome (see Table 11.1) effectively renders the Conservatives a party of rural, suburban, middle England, with a vote heavily concentrated in the south. Even here, though, in the main region of traditional Conservative electoral strength, Labour has made inroads since 1997 as a ‘catch-all party’. In the north of England, the Conservatives failed to win any seats at all in cities such as Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield and Newcastle.

The Conservatives remain the party of the professional classes, the self-employed, the elderly, homeowners and readers of the *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph* and *The Times*. In addition, the largest Conservative vote gain in 2001 was amongst the unemployed, although this 'success' still only produced a vote share of 23 per cent within this particular category, still leaving a lead of 31 per cent for Labour.⁸

However, in a 'post-ideological' age marked by partisan and class dealignment, these figures do not provide any real comfort for the Conservatives because socio-economic background as a whole is no longer a major determinant of electoral choice. Instead, questions of overall policy competence, leader images and issue saliency are now assuming that role.

The 2001 defeat was the first time that the Conservative Party had suffered a second successive landslide. After the 1945 defeat, the party achieved a near miss in 1950 and its heavy defeat in 1966 was followed by immediate victory in 1970. Between 1992 and 2001, the party lost nearly 6 million votes (down to 8.3 million from 14 million), a trend reinforced by tactical voting by Liberal Democrat voters which remains, as in 1997, helpful to Labour in key marginal seats. The exact degree to which tactical voting affected the overall outcome of the election is disputed but it is generally agreed that, in 2001, tactical voting by Labour supporters enabled the Liberal Democrats to retain some of the seats they first won in 1997 while Liberal Democrat voters returned the favour for Labour to do the same.⁹ The Conservative Party also simultaneously suffered from the workings of the first-past-the-post electoral system, as we shall see later on.

Given this outcome in 2001, and looking ahead to the next general election in 2005/6, the Conservatives will need a uniform national swing to them of at least 6.5 per cent. A swing of 9 per cent will make the Conservatives the largest party, but winning the next election will require a Labour-Conservative swing of 10.5 per cent to produce an overall Conservative majority of one seat: this is twice the size of any swing achieved in the post-war era. The Conservatives will require a 13 per cent lead in votes over Labour to form the next government.¹⁰

These results and predictions, stark as they are, should not have been such a surprise to many, since in the period between 1997 and 2001, the Conservative Party had suffered much more than simply at the ballot box. The party had also to confront a greater degree of organisational and strategic disarray in terms of dissension within the Shadow Cabinet, an increasing financial deficit, a decline in the level of party activism, falling membership figures and widespread press scepticism. In addition, the Conservatives made little progress in terms of the gender composition of the parliamentary party, with only fourteen of their 166 MPs (8.4 per cent) elected in 2001 being women. The party has no ethnic minority MPs. These statistics remain important in terms of any Conservative 'message' regarding

its wish and claim to represent the whole of British society in a more inclusive way than in the recent past.

Given these simultaneous and very serious challenges, it was not surprising that the party made little ground in the opinion polls, although the rock-like stability in the party's poll rating over the four-year period from 1997 to 2001 is still utterly remarkable. In the period between May 1997 and April 2001, the Conservative opinion poll rating for vote intention ranged between 23 per cent and 36 per cent. This latter maximum is an exaggeration however. The rating was only attained for a very brief period in the autumn of 2000 during the protests against increases in fuel prices and the government's handling of the issue. More usually, over the four-year period, the Conservatives were stuck at around 30 per cent, although even this rating, mainly in the latter part of the period, represented an improvement on the first eighteen months of Hague's leadership when the party's national poll rating often panned out at about 28 per cent.¹¹

In the election campaign polls of 2001, the Conservative vote range was still stuck between 28 and 33 per cent. Fully twenty-six out of thirty-two polls placed the Conservatives in the range 28–32 per cent and thirty out of thirty-two polls in the range 27–33 per cent.¹²

The recovery strategy of the Conservatives after 1997

Whilst hindsight is always a wonderful luxury, it was partially apparent, even at the time, that the Conservative leadership was unable to agree in crucial ways why they had crashed to such an electoral humiliation in 1997 and, in particular, what needed to be done to rebuild the party before the next election. The 1997 defeat was seen as a 'blip', one that could be put right four years later with renewed organisational effort and reformed party unity. The main lessons of the Labour Party's four successive election defeats between 1979 and 1992 in terms of policy renewal, pragmatic party leadership and a careful re-shaping of the party's image were ignored.

Under Hague's leadership, various forms of 'new' conservatism (a 'fresh start', 'common sense', 'caring', 'compassionate', 'kitchen table') were first floated rhetorically but then not followed through in detail. Towards the election campaign of 2001, populist policies on issues such as 'bogus' asylum seekers and tackling crime crowded out any serious and sustained attempt to take on the Labour government and its occupation of the political centre ground. As a strategy to secure the party's core, loyalist vote and to establish 'clear blue water' between the main parties, this may have made sense. As a strategy to increase the party's attraction to floating voters and those who were disaffected and distrustful of the party after eighteen years in power, it appeared to be an admission of inevitable defeat. The implicit basis for this approach was that there was a 'silent majority' of voters simply waiting for

and wanting to be mobilised by right-wing populism. The empirical evidence underpinning this assumption was never produced.

Regardless of any policy renewal and development, Hague's immediate task was to rebuild unity within a party still scarred by recent memories of the seemingly endemic party dissent over European integration under John Major which almost became a defining feature of his government.¹³ The common assumption is that divided parties do not win elections. Hague seemed to accept this concern but he did not find the means to deal with it. Internal referenda on policy might give the impression of party unity but, on the key policy question, Hague was not master in his own house.¹⁴ The 'European issue' was not going to be confronted until the Blair government held a referendum on membership of the euro. Until then, virtually any mention of 'Europe' inevitably harked back in the minds of the voters to the Major days of repeated turbulence and ever-increasing exasperation, a febrile condition dominating the party to such an extent that it contributed considerably to the 1997 landslide election defeat.

Mid-term elections, 1997–2001

Throughout his leadership of the party, Hague anxiously sought 'proof' that his overall strategy for recovery was working in terms of interim election results and opinion poll ratings. As mentioned earlier, the latter showed no evidence whatsoever of success (and they were thus routinely dismissed as not being 'real'). The former source of empirical evidence of potential Conservative recovery was patchy and unclear in terms of its political significance.

The Labour government under Blair did not lose a single by-election of the fifteen head-to-head contests between the main two parties during the 1997–2001 Parliament. In addition, the Conservatives contrived to lose the seat of Romsey in Hampshire to the Liberal Democrats in a by-election held in May 2000. Although the Conservative vote only decreased by 4.0 per cent – not in itself enough to lose the seat – compared to the 1997 general election, the collapse in the Labour vote by nearly 15 per cent via tactical voting was enough for the Liberal Democrats to win. As a reliable sign of things to come, the Conservatives managing to lose a safe seat in the mid-term of a Labour government was hard to beat.

The Conservatives were also hammered by the Liberal Democrats in the re-run general election contest in Winchester in November 1997. The Liberal Democrat share of the vote rose from 42.1 per cent to 68.0 per cent between May and November 1997. Even the return of Michael Portillo to the House of Commons after winning the by-election in Kensington and Chelsea in November 1999 was to prove a double-edged sword for Hague in terms of forging a good working relationship with a supposed leadership rival, someone deemed to have the backing of important sections of the Conservative Party.

In his constant search for evidence that the Conservative Party was on the mend, Hague latched quickly on to the outcome of the elections to the European Parliament (EP) held in June 1999, claiming that the Conservatives had 'won' the election. He presumably meant that the Conservatives had won more seats than Labour since no government is formed as the result of European Parliament elections. The Conservatives won thirty-six seats compared to twenty-nine for Labour and this did indeed contrast sharply with the outcome of the previous EP election in 1994 (Labour sixty-two, Conservatives nineteen). However, the 1999 EP election turnout was a pitiful 24 per cent, much more an indication of voter apathy and alienation than of renewed support for the Conservatives. The 'success' of the Conservatives in the EP election was at least partly related to the introduction of a closed list system of proportional representation rather than the first-past-the-post electoral system used for Westminster elections. This had also proved important for ensuring Conservative representation in the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.

In local elections, the overall picture for the Conservative Party was one of a quiet and modest advance, with net gains in terms of council control and seats recorded each year between 1998 and 2001. At the end of the Parliament, however, the party had a majority in only ten of the thirty-four shire counties, and they controlled no local authorities at all in either Scotland or Wales. In England, the Conservatives controlled only ninety-six of the 380 local authorities, mainly in the small towns, suburbs or rural areas.¹⁵

The official Conservative candidate, Steve Norris, came second to the independent candidate, Ken Livingstone, in the election to be the mayor of London held in May 2000. Norris succeeded in pushing the official Labour candidate, Frank Dobson, into third place, winning 27 per cent of the vote compared to 38 per cent for Livingstone. In addition, the Conservatives won the same number of seats on the Greater London Authority as Labour (both winning nine seats).

The main lesson of all these interim elections was that the Conservatives could still perform well, if erratically, at sub-national, supra-national and 'second-order' elections of various types. However, given the fact that these elections are often marked by very low turnout, interpreting their outcomes as evidence of a likely recovery of the party in elections to Westminster, with national power at stake, was unduly complacent and wishfully over-optimistic.

William Hague's opinion poll ratings

The Conservative Party was bound to fight the next national election with Hague as its leader, given that he had only been at the helm for four years since succeeding Major. The problem for the party was therefore how best to create a credible 'narrative' around Hague's strengths and how best to deal

Table 11.2 William Hague as (i) Leader of the Opposition and (ii) the best person for Prime Minister

	(i)	(ii)
Period when average rating measured		
1997 (July–December)	–18	10
1998	–28	12
1999	–26	14
2000	–22	20
2001 (January–April)	–29	19

Note: The data in column (i) are the net score of positive minus negative responses to the question, ‘do you think that Mr Hague is or is not proving a good leader of the Conservative Party?’. The data in column (ii) are the percentage of the respective sample respondents who chose Hague as the best Prime Minister.

Sources: *British Elections and Parties Review*, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001 (published by Frank Cass). Original data published in the monthly ‘Gallup Political and Economic Index’, or Gallup ‘snapshot’ polls.

with the widespread concerns regarding his image. Hague’s debating strengths at Prime Minister’s Question Time in the House of Commons were noted and often applauded within the confines of the ‘Westminster village’ but they made little impact with the voters where it mattered most. Blair’s predictable refusal to agree to a television debate with Hague (probably also including Charles Kennedy, the leader of the Liberal Democrats) on television during the election campaign, despite the argument that such a debate might stimulate turnout at the election, effectively neutralised one of Hague’s acknowledged strengths.

The available polling evidence asking about perceptions as to whether Hague was doing a good job as the Conservative Party leader or how he fared in terms of evaluating the best Prime Minister told a story of persistent weakness rather than strength.

The satisfaction ratings of Hague from the time he took over as Conservative leader were virtually always negative throughout the Parliament. His ‘honeymoon period’ as leader lasted for precisely three months (with ratings of +3, 0 and –2 between July and September 1997) but after that, his rating was always heavily negative, reaching a lowpoint of –40 in October 1997. After that, his rating settled at a range of –11 to –29 in 1998, between –21 to –36 in 1999, between –10 to –37 in 2000 and between –27 to –31 in the first four months of 2001 (the annual averages for this particular indicator are shown in Table 11.2).

Hague’s ‘best’ period was around the time of the fuel crisis of September 2000, with ratings of –10 in July and –14 in August. For most of the overall period, he made little impression against a Prime Minister chalking up

satisfaction ratings of between +30 and +40. Even when Blair’s rating slipped dramatically, becoming mildly negative for six months from July 2000 onwards, Hague was unable to exploit the rare opportunity. Blair’s rating recovered slightly to enter the election campaign just about positive, but Hague’s rating had slipped back again to −29 as the formal election campaign got under way.

These feelings of satisfaction or otherwise about the party leaders also fed through into perceptions as to which party leader would make the best Prime Minister. The percentage of respondents who chose Hague as the best Prime Minister is shown in the second column of Table 11.2. Blair’s dominance is very apparent here as well, with the incumbent often winning the support of between 50–60 per cent of the sample. This preference dipped somewhat in late 2000 but, even then, Blair remained the choice as best Prime Minister of 40 per cent of the voters. This period also saw Hague’s highest popularity rating but he was unable to chalk up more than a maximum preference of 24 per cent.

We can also ‘unpack’ the available data to note the particular problems that Hague took into the election campaign. Table 11.3 gives a general insight into the mix of personality and policies affecting the performance of any party leader. There appeared to be ‘deficits’ on both aspects, with fully 37 per cent saying that they neither liked Hague as a person nor his policies. In contrast, only 25 per cent gave this response for Blair. Whilst 34 per cent liked both Blair as a person and his policies, only 15 per cent said the same regarding Hague. Even after nearly four years as Conservative leader, 17 per cent still had no opinion about Hague.

Table 11.3 Views on William Hague (% , January 2001)

I like him and I like his policies	15
I like him but I dislike his policies	15
I dislike him but I like his policies	16
I dislike him and I dislike his policies	37
No opinion	17

Source: www.mori.com/polls/2001/t010122.shtml.

More specifically, MORI offered its respondents a list of both favourable and unfavourable things said about politicians and asked them to pick the ones they felt best fitted the party leaders. The percentage scores for William Hague are shown in Table 11.4. The first column contains data from April 2001 and the second the results from the same question back in October 1997.

Hague scored best on ‘being patriotic’ and as someone who ‘understands the problems facing Britain’ but he was also regarded as ‘inexperienced’, ‘out of touch with ordinary people’ and ‘rather narrow minded’. In contrast, Blair

Table 11.4 Perceived attributes of William Hague (%) April 2001 and October 1997

	<i>April 2001</i>	<i>October 1997</i>
Rather inexperienced	33	(52)
Out of touch with ordinary people	28	(29)
Rather narrow minded	24	(16)
Tends to talk down to people	23	(21)
Patriotic	21	(18)
Understands the problems facing Britain	17	(10)
A capable leader	12	(9)
Good in a crisis	6	(3)
Has got a lot of personality	5	(5)
Has sound judgement	5	(5)

Source: 2001 – www.mori.com/polls/2001/t010424.shtml. 1997 – P. Cowley and S. Quayle, ‘The Conservatives: Running on the Spot’, in A. Geddes and J. Tonge (eds), *Labour’s Second Landslide: The British General Election 2001* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 59.

was seen as ‘a capable leader’ (33 per cent) and as someone who ‘understands the problems facing Britain’ (25 per cent). In terms of negative attributes, Blair was also regarded as someone who ‘tends to talk down to people’ (25 per cent) and who is ‘out of touch with ordinary people’ (36 per cent).

It is always easiest to blame the messenger and to assume that the party leader is a significant influence on how people vote. The debate over ‘leader effects’ is largely a question of which came first: did voters like Hague because they support the Conservative Party or did they support the Conservative Party because they like Hague? Untangling this web of politically relevant attitudes and opinions is always complex.

For most voters, this particular web will encompass a range of judgments and evaluations relating to their social background, general partisan views based on party identification, retrospective evaluations of the incumbent government’s performance, prospective evaluations of the different parties (both government and opposition), evaluations of specific leadership traits and, finally, overall evaluations of the various parties and their leaders. Anthony King lists twenty-six personal attributes that might have a bearing on voting decisions.¹⁶ Actual and potential effectiveness in political office are often seen as being more important than likeability as a human being, the qualities the voters would prefer to perceive in a Prime Minister rather than in their next-door neighbour.

These various influences inevitably interact and overlap with one another in a continuous and dynamic process of evaluation to such an extent that it is especially problematic to ascribe to any *single* influence the predominant

role in voter decision-making. Most recent research on this theme suggests there is little direct impact of leaders and their personalities on electoral choice that is net of values, policy preferences and assessments of the state of the economy.¹⁷

In terms of coverage in the campaign itself, Blair appeared in 35.4 per cent of election news items and Hague in 26.4 per cent, a considerably wider gap than between Major and Blair in 1997 (34.1 per cent against 35.5 per cent). The ‘lead’ of Blair in 2001 was particularly apparent in the press. The overall campaign in 2001 was seen as being ‘presidentialised’, post-partisan and narrow in focus.¹⁸

The 2001 general election campaign

For some commentators, the Conservative election campaign of 2001 was partially successful so far as it went, from an admittedly low level of expectations, but it was one ultimately fought on the wrong issues and the wrong overall agenda.¹⁹ Concentrating upon issues such as the euro and ‘saving the pound’, asylum seekers, tax cuts and crime, and not upon public services such as schools and hospitals, represented a sustained misperception by the party of the attitudes and priorities of the electorate. The data in Table 11.5 show clearly that the voters thought the state of the public services was the most important issue in the months immediately prior to the 2001 election.

Table 11.5 Issue saliency at the 2001 general election (%)

	<i>NHS</i>	<i>Education</i>	<i>Law and Order</i>	<i>EU</i>	<i>Unemployment</i>
January	50	32	30	21	12
February	48	37	25	23	12
March	37	29	16	17	10
April	41	32	19	14	12

Note: The percentages in the table total more than 100 per cent because the data are a combination of more than one answer (the most important issue and then other important issues).

Source: www.mori.com/polls/trends/issues.shtml.

One very interesting omission from the top of the list of most important issues is the overall state of the economy. On average, only 10 per cent chose this as the most important issue. This is ample testimony to widespread perceptions that Labour Chancellor Gordon Brown had managed the economy assiduously and competently in their first term of office. This is borne out by the finding that Labour was seen as having the best policy for managing the economy by 44 per cent to the Conservative rating of 18 per cent.

Not only were the Conservatives choosing to emphasise the ‘wrong’ issues based on the views of the voters, they were also not seen as the party

with the best policies on the issues that voters cared about most (see Table 11.6). In terms of health care and education, the two issues deemed to be most important, Labour was seen as the best party by a long way – as it was on managing the economy.

The issues on which the Conservatives were seen as the best party, were all relatively 'low salience' issues compared to questions of the state of public services. The question of Europe and the euro, for example, had been effectively neutralised for many voters by the government promise to hold a referendum before any possible entry to the single currency. The Conservatives were seen as the best party very narrowly on defence policy/foreign affairs (26 per cent to 25 per cent for Labour) but this was seen as an important issue by only an average of 4 per cent of the voters in the lead-up to the election campaign.

Table 11.6 Best party policy on problems facing Britain today
(%, February 2001)

	<i>Con.</i>	<i>Lab.</i>	<i>LD</i>	<i>None</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Healthcare	14	42	7	11	24
Education	17	44	8	7	23
Law and Order	26	30	5	11	27
EU	26	27	5	9	31
Unemployment	12	48	2	11	26

Source: www.mori.com/polls/2001/t010220.shtml.

In addition to emphasising the wrong issues and not having the best policies on the issues which the voters cared about most, the Conservatives were equally unable to make a variety of sleaze and incompetence charges against the government stick. There was a wide choice of possible foci here: the foot and mouth crisis delaying the election by a month, the continuing expenditure on the Millennium Dome, the underlying issues which had sparked the anger of the fuel protesters in the autumn of 2000, and the mobilisation potential of the Countryside Alliance in terms of Labour's stated intention to ban hunting with hounds. It should equally not have been too onerous to home in on a variety of more minor examples which showed the Blair administration at its worst, exuding a general air of smugness and an instinctive preference for extensive, if occasionally unsure, control of the overall political process.

Instead, the Conservatives seemed to believe that more and more effort should be targeted at less and less of the electorate. They never did find an overarching theme for their 2001 campaign. This failure contrasts sharply with Mrs Thatcher's clear-sighted depiction of her 'enemies of choice' such as the trade unions within a context of a Labour Party flirting with electoral suicide. Hague had none of these options available to him with which he

could position and structure his campaign on a much firmer foundation. Instead, he concentrated upon the less credible, less important issues that did not resonate with the British voters.

This is not to say that Labour was overwhelmingly popular. Its 2001 vote share of 41 per cent was hardly a ringing endorsement of the achievements in its first term and a turnout crashing to below 60 per cent does not merit the description of a 'culture of contentment'. The main problem the Conservatives faced was not that Labour was fireproof and backed enthusiastically by the electorate. It was that their campaign missed the essential point of changing voter priorities and they did not manage to dispel the uneasy feeling that they would do even worse than Labour if re-elected. Evidently a second term in the electoral wilderness was needed before the Conservatives could hope to be trusted with national office again.

It seems unlikely that the four-week formal election campaign changed many votes, particularly in terms of the overall outcome. The Liberal Democrats were often seen as having run the 'best' campaign in terms of their focus on public services and 'honest taxation'.²⁰ Overall leader perceptions or the specific events of the election campaign did not appear to change much either. The main reasons for the 2001 election result lay further back in time than Hague's election as party leader. Arguably, the 2001 election campaign was more about the state of the Conservatives than the achievements of the government.

The Conservatives were regarded as having fought the campaign as the opposition rather than as a government in waiting in that they were reported by the media as attacking their opponents' policies nearly twice as frequently and presenting their own policies roughly half as frequently as Labour. The Conservatives were also twice as often reported as presenting policies in the context of internal disputes within the party.²¹

The chaotic memories of the Major years remained too sharp for many to seriously contemplate supporting a party that continued to labour under the disadvantages derived from such deep-seated and seemingly intractable conflicts between 1990 and 1997. Appealing to voters towards the end of the 2001 campaign to reduce Blair's impending landslide majority was utterly typical of the Conservative Party's defeatist strategy rooted in implicit acknowledgement of severe weaknesses within the party. There were a number of good reasons for not voting for Blair a second time in 2001 but there were no compelling reasons at all for voting Conservative.

The workings of the electoral system

If the above problems and challenges were not enough for the Conservatives, we must also look at the ways in which the party is disadvantaged electorally by the workings of the first-past-the post electoral system which the party

continues to defend stoutly for elections to the House of Commons. At the 2001 election, Labour won 41 per cent of the votes but 63 per cent of the seats, whilst the Conservatives won 32 per cent of the votes but only 25 per cent of the seats. The Liberal Democrats won 18 per cent and 8 per cent respectively.

There are two main reasons for this bias towards Labour, some of whose effects might be mitigated by changing the constituency boundaries in time for the next general election, but much of which will still remain.

Firstly, Labour benefits from winning seats that have smaller electorates and lower turnouts. Labour seats tend to be in the inner cities but the population drift to the suburbs and countryside, which should favour the Conservatives, is only taken into account intermittently with the periodic revision of the constituency boundaries. These boundaries are only reviewed at 8–12 year intervals, which means the data are often out-of-date when any boundary changes based on them are actually implemented. In addition, future projections of population growth are not taken into account. Both the 1997 and 2001 elections were fought on the basis of the 1991 electorates in England and the 1992 electorates in Scotland and Wales. Both Scotland and Wales also have more constituencies by law than they should have, purely in terms of population, and Labour's electoral strength in these two areas also works to the party's benefit.

Secondly, the increasing use of tactical voting has also benefited Labour. Anti-Conservative tactical voting by both Labour and Liberal Democrat voters has, in the last two general elections, ensured that both parties have retained seats they might well otherwise have lost back to the Conservatives. In 2001, the Conservatives only gained four of Labour's thirty most vulnerable seats, although they moved close in three others; in the remaining twenty-three seats, Labour moved even further ahead of the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats lost only two of their eighteen most vulnerable seats to the Conservatives, whilst in two others, the Conservatives performed better than in 1997. In the remaining fourteen seats, the Liberal Democrat vote share increased even further.²²

The combined effect of these two factors is that Labour, at the last three general elections, has gained a substantial 'seat bias' based on assumptions of equal vote shares producing an equal number of seats for each main party and the same lead in votes over the other main party in order to obtain an overall majority of seats. However, this is far from the case in reality. If both the Conservatives and Labour won 37.4 per cent of the vote, Labour would still have a lead of 140 seats. Even if the Conservatives had won a 9.3 per cent lead over Labour in 2001, they would still have been twenty-five seats short of an overall majority.²³ In 1992, the Conservatives were denied a comfortable majority due to this bias within the system. Instead, despite their record vote, they only achieved an overall majority of twenty-one, which was

eventually whittled away to nothing through by-election losses – thus increasing the potential for serious backbench revolts, particularly on the issue of European integration.

In a close election, the possibility exists of the party winning the most votes not winning the most seats, thus opening up the current electoral system to further criticism regarding its ‘unfairness’.

This seat bias may be reduced by the introduction of new constituency boundaries to take account of population movements and the number of seats in Scotland may equally be reduced. However, the degree of bias is not likely to be changed in any major way by these technical alterations if anti-Conservative tactical voting remains effective in key marginal seats, if Labour continues to chalk up above-average performances in the marginal constituencies it already holds, and if it also continues to draw benefit from unequally sized constituencies. In this context, the already enormous challenges facing the Conservatives at the next election are made substantially more difficult.

Conclusion

A few days before the 2001 general election, one unnamed senior Conservative suggested, on the basis of private canvassing evidence, that ‘news from our target marginals is good. Forget predictions about Labour increasing its majority. We will make net gains.’²⁴ Two out of three predictions correct is certainly not a bad score but they were only correct at the utterly minimal and very pessimistic end of the scale of expectations. There were crumbs of comfort for the Conservatives in that they did not actually go backwards in 2001, but that represented scant and wholly inadequate reassurance for a party once instinctively sure of its inalienable and commanding role in shaping the contours of British politics.

The academic analyses published since the election have all swung much more towards varieties of the ‘mountainous climb’ metaphor than assessments founded on one ‘last push’ in four years time. For example, Butler and Kavanagh believe that any claims that the 2001 election outcome was not so bad for the Conservatives, in terms of providing a platform for the next election, require ‘some heroic assumptions and the acceptance of questionable analogies’.²⁵ Norris and Lovenduski compare the belief that the 2001 election outcome for the Conservatives was not that bad to being similar to ‘saying that the Titanic voyage was a success because a few people survived on life rafts’.²⁶

Looking forward, Ivor Crewe has set out the six main options, which the Conservatives could adopt as their latest recovery strategy.²⁷ Firstly, the party could go down the road of economic Thatcherism, including more privatisation of areas such as welfare. However, this might lose more votes than it could gain.

Secondly, the party could adopt populist authoritarianism on cultural and citizenship issues such as the family, crime and asylum seekers. The danger here would be to divide the party once more on issues that are of limited issue saliency.

Thirdly, social libertarianism could be adopted in order to move to the left on cultural and citizenship issues akin to the position of Michael Portillo in his 2001 leadership campaign. The Conservative Party would become more liberal but such policies would only appeal to minorities in both the party and the country at large.

Fourthly, the party could adopt an agenda of constitutional reform. This would involve establishing an elected House of Lords, endorsing electoral reform and agreeing to grant further powers to the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly. This would have the advantage of reducing the present distance from the Liberal Democrats for potential electoral advantage and improved, if still wary, inter-party relationships. Reversing such long-held and stubbornly defended positions in terms of the structure of the British state would be seen by many in the party as too radical this side of another heavy election defeat in four years time.

Fifthly, the party could implement a U-turn on policy towards the euro, adopting a more neutral position akin to that of the government. This would certainly mark the party out as 'new' and 'pragmatic' but would also engender severe internal party divisions, exacerbating the already existing image amongst the voters of the Conservatives being a divided party.

Finally, the Conservatives could become the party of public services, by challenging Labour on its own territory and holding Blair to account on his promise to 'deliver'. This will certainly provide a lot of useful material with which to attack the Blair government, given the long time span needed to improve the quality of the public services. The main problem with this approach lies in establishing the credibility of the Conservatives in terms of being able to 'deliver' better than Labour and not, in the process, to alienate even more voters from the political process by indulging in a slanging match of statistics which sheds much more unfocused, intemperate heat than light. This broad approach is supported by Collings and Seldon who recommend that, 'the next Tory leader should spend the next four years saying, "Labour will not deliver its promises on health, education and transport"'.²⁸ It is an approach that Iain Duncan Smith seems to be adopting as well, concentrating more on actual output than precise mechanisms.

Duncan Smith's leadership of the party will be severely tested by the host of interrelated challenges we have considered in this chapter. In particular, how he tackles the legacy of Thatcherism and adapts the Conservative Party to the very changed circumstances in which he leads them will lie at the core of his task.²⁹ To a great extent, the Conservatives have still not really steadied themselves after the turbulent and profoundly divisive events

of the Premiership of John Major in which the party's overall credibility, particularly in terms of a reputation for economic competence, was lost, its image severely tarnished and its policy direction buffeted and blown off course.

During this period, the Conservatives became largely defined in terms of negatives: 'boom and bust' economics and strongly associated with tax cuts, leading to cuts in public services, tags which Labour has managed to keep pinned to the Conservative Party breast ever since. Whilst we should always be sceptical of exaggerated claims of 'newness' in politics, the Conservative Party desperately needs a major overhaul in terms of its credibility and image. Proposing serious reform to the electoral system to Westminster would be one way of doing this. This would partly be related to party self-interest of course, as we explained earlier, and it would undoubtedly be met with widespread scepticism. But such a change would, if carried through, give some genuine substance to claims of being 'new', 'inclusive' and 'modern'.³⁰

In the absence of such an admittedly radical approach to defining new policies, the Conservatives will inevitably be flirting with more electoral defeats. The structural disadvantages of their present unenviable electoral position are utterly stark, although being overtaken by the Liberal Democrats as the main opposition to Labour now seems much more unlikely than in the immediate aftermath of the 2001 election. Nevertheless, the Conservatives cannot ignore the obvious threats, to the extent that no change is no option.

The 'deficits' which the party currently faces can only be overcome by a renewed and thoroughgoing practical understanding that, for most ordinary voters in Britain, politics is an elemental process of only passing interest. For many electors, their key focus is upon a narrow range of simplified issues and personalities, mediated as broadly perceived 'performance' in opposition rather than a grasp of detailed policies.

New policies are certainly important and the 'devil', as always, will certainly lie in the detail. However, the main consideration for the Conservatives must be to ensure that the very likely increasing disenchantment with the Blair administration can be steadily converted into electoral support for a changed Conservative Party, by concentrating as much on the 'small' picture of everyday lives as the 'big picture' of policy development. This must also be a party whose credibility has been restored and which has instituted the indispensable changes soberly designed to lead the party firmly back on to the path where it re-discovers its 'ruthless, visceral appetite for power'.³¹

Notes

- 1 Duncan Smith describing Clarke because of the latter's views on Europe were at odds with those of most Conservative Party members. A. McElvoy, 'Iain Duncan Smith: extreme? I'll tell you what's extreme', *Independent on Sunday*, 29 July 2001.

- 2 Clarke describing Duncan Smith on the *Jimmy Young Show* on BBC Radio 2, reported in N. Watt, 'Clarke dismisses Tory rival as "hanger and flogger"', *Guardian*, 30 August 2001.
- 3 Stephen Bayley believes that 'we have no effective opposition, because there are no real beliefs for them to oppose', in N. Walsh, 'How was Blair's first term for you?', *Observer*, 6 May 2001. R. Skidelsky, 'Five years Labour', *Prospect*, May 2002, p. 22, characterised the Blair government as being, 'Britain's first truly representative government ... Its very mediocrity of language and ambition reflects the land it governs – a second-class country with a great past, a comfortable present, and modest prospects.'
- 4 A. Grice, 'New approach preaches power of being positive', *Independent*, 25 March 2002. Grice noted that 'Duncan Smith poses a far more dangerous threat to Tony Blair than Labour realises' and 'his unspun image is a deliberate contrast to Mr Blair and may prove popular with the voters if Mr Blair cannot stem the tide of public and party discontent'. Grice also noted the 'little or no flesh on the party's policy bones'.
- 5 Of the 111-year period 1886–1997, non-Conservative governments with parliamentary majorities had been in office for less than twenty years. A. Seldon, 'Thatcher's legacy distorts the Tory vision', *Financial Times*, 24 August 2001.
- 6 R. Shrimley and B. Groom, 'Hague defiant as polls put Tory share of vote at 32%', *Financial Times*, 4 May 2001.
- 7 P. Norris, 'Apathetic landslide: the 2001 British general election', in P. Norris (ed.), *Britain Votes 2001* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 13.
- 8 Data taken from www.mori.com/polls/2001/election.shtml.
- 9 J. Bartle, 'Why Labour won – again', in A. King (ed.), *Britain at the Polls, 2001* (New York, Chatham House Publishers, 2002), p. 195. See also I. Crewe, 'Things can only get worse for the Tories', *New Statesman*, 30 April 2001.
- 10 Norris, 'Apathetic landslide', p. 4.
- 11 See *British Elections and Parties Review*, 1998, 1999, 2000 (published by Frank Cass); data for 2001 calculated from *Elections, Public Opinion and Parties in Britain*, (EPOP) Newsletter and MORI polling data available on www.mori.com.
- 12 I. Crewe, 'The opinion polls: still biased to Labour', in Norris (ed.), *Britain Votes 2001*, p. 94.
- 13 D. Broughton, 'The limitations of likeability: the Major premiership and public opinion', in P. Dorey (ed.), *The Major Premiership: Politics and Policies Under John Major, 1990–97* (London, Macmillan, 1999), pp. 199–217.
- 14 P. Norton, 'The Conservative Party: is there anyone out there?', in King (ed.), *Britain at the Polls, 2001*, pp. 81–8.
- 15 D. Butler and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001* (London, Palgrave, 2002), p. 15.
- 16 A. King, 'Do leaders' personalities really matter?', in A. King (ed.), *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 9.
- 17 J. Bartle and I. Crewe, 'The impact of party leaders in Britain: strong assumptions, weak evidence', in King (ed.), *Leaders' Personalities and the Outcomes of Democratic Elections*, pp. 70–95.
- 18 P. Golding and D. Deacon, 'An election that many watched but few enjoyed', *Guardian*, 12 June 2001.
- 19 R. Shrimley, 'Looking Back on Election 2001', *Representation*, 38 (2001) 187–91; Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001*, p. 255.
- 20 Bartle, 'Why Labour won – again', p. 173.

- 21 Golding and Deacon, 'An election that many watched but few enjoyed'.
- 22 I. Crewe, 'A new political hegemony?', in King (ed.), *Britain at the Polls, 2001*, pp. 218–19.
- 23 J. Curtice, 'The electoral system: biased to Blair?', in Norris (ed.), *Britain Votes 2001*, p. 243.
- 24 D. Smith, 'Four years on, the Tories are just one point up in the polls', *Sunday Times*, 3 June 2001.
- 25 Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2001*, p. 242.
- 26 P. Norris and J. Lovenduski, 'The iceberg and the Titanic: electoral defeat, policy moods and party change', paper presented to the annual conference of the Elections, Public Opinion and Parties (EPOP) specialist group, University of Sussex, September 2001.
- 27 Crewe, 'A new political hegemony?', pp. 221–4.
- 28 D. Collings and A. Seldon, 'Conservatives in opposition', in Norris (ed.), *Britain Votes 2001*, p. 72.
- 29 A comparison between the Conservative Party and *Fawlty Towers* makes the point neatly. The similarities between the two are based on 'faded gentility, a suspicion of foreigners and the continuing influence of a powerful and fearsomely coiffured woman', J. Guthrie, 'Putting humour into "Tory Towers"', *Financial Times*, 24 August 2001. Steve Norris was more blunt in describing the Conservatives as the 'nasty, exclusive, rather angry and backward-looking party', J. Ashley, 'The NS interview', *New Statesman*, 25 June 2001, p. 18.
- 30 Above all, as Chris Patten put it, the Conservatives under Duncan Smith must 'demonstrate that the Conservative Party isn't simply a wholly-owned subsidiary of the *Daily Telegraph*', quoted in C. Newman and P. Norman, 'Rightwing nature of top team angers Tory left', *Financial Times*, 15 September 2001.
- 31 D. Macintyre, 'Has the Conservative Party lost its appetite for power', *Independent*, 12 July 2001.