The reform of the Conservative Party

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When William Hague appeared on the platform at the 2001 Conservative Party conference, he was greeted by a wave of sympathy which extended far beyond the audience at Blackpool. This was more than the usual reaction to a plucky underdog: it was a well-deserved testimony to the dignity which had marked William's conduct since the 2001 general election. Perhaps the public had begun to appreciate some of William's qualities. The pity is that the truth dawned on most of them far too late.

As someone who witnessed at close hand William's courage and good humour during some of the darkest days the Conservative Party has known, I feel strongly that the disappointing result in June 2001 should be seen in its true context. When a defeated party chooses a new leader it is always tempting to write off the old regime and hope for better times ahead. But although I supported Iain Duncan Smith and wish him every good fortune for the next battle, I hope that he realises what a hard act he has to follow. The reality is that although the last fight ended badly, without William we would have been in no condition to fight at all.

William asked me to be his first Party Chairman before the final round of the leadership ballot, as part of his contingency planning. When he first contacted me on the telephone I was reluctant to get involved. I had many outside commitments, and as I pointed out I hardly knew him. But any doubts disappeared at our first meeting. I knew that it would be a pleasure to work with William. It was not just that he seemed to have an inexhaustible stock of good humour and optimism. More important, he knew what he wanted and he had the determination to see things through. Instead of having to boost his morale, in the early days I felt that it was almost necessary to curb his enthusiasm for the task ahead.

One of the first gatherings of party members I attended in my new capacity proved to me how difficult it was going to be to knock us back into shape. I arrived just in time to hear a prominent activist delivering a tirade of abuse against the parliamentary party. At the first conference after the 1997 general election the atmosphere was nearly as bad. I had suggested that

as a demonstration of our joint determination to produce a united, democratic party, the Chairman of the 1922 Committee, Archie Hamilton, the Chairman of the National Union Executive, Robin Hodgson and Archie Norman, the Vice-Chairman of the party, should all speak in the debate on the Green Paper on reform, which I would wind up. When Archie Hamilton spoke, he was heckled by the audience. He was not troubled, raised himself to his full height of about six foot six inches and raised the volume of his voice. He was then heard by a more respectful, if not intimidated audience!

William had decided to make reform of the party the central plank of his leadership campaign. This was the right response to the grievances, real or imaginary, of our grass roots membership. The ballot to endorse his reform programme and his own position was the perfect way to stabilise the situation. Later he decided with my support to hold a similar ballot on his policy towards the single currency in the run up to the 1998 Conference. He proved to be right again, and the issue which had caused us so much trouble for so long was pretty well neutralised for the rest of the Parliament. Obviously a subject which arouses so much passion on both sides could not disappear entirely, but if anything William's tactics worked too well. As soon as something like peace was restored, people began to take it for granted. I doubt that any other leader, or any other policy, could have come so close to complete success, and this major achievement should not be forgotten now.

People also should remember the state of our finances after the 1997 general election. We were very near to bankruptcy, and the voluntary party was particularly exercised by our expenditure of £28 million during the 1997 election campaign. William offered full support for the difficult decisions I felt we had to take and this, coupled with his brave decision to appoint Michael Ashcroft as Party Treasurer, resulted in Iain Duncan Smith inheriting a much more healthy financial situation. Obviously we would have all preferred a substantial increase in party membership, and here William was unlucky. The temporary unpopularity of the party in the country, combined with a mood of apathy created by Labour's spin doctors, has made recruitment very difficult for all parties. It will take some time to hit the targets William set, but by aiming high he showed his confidence in the party he had supported since childhood, and in the ideas which have served this country so well. Even so, he left the party with a larger membership than either the Labour or Liberal Democrat parties (and possibly bigger than the pair put together if the truth were known).

Although there were a number of necessary and far-reaching reforms during my time at Central Office, in my view the most important was the replacement of the previous tripartite structure of the party with a single, unified system. In this volume, Richard Kelly has criticised the eventual composition of the Party Board on the grounds that it was insufficiently democratic. It may be true that we were unduly influenced by New Labour's

example in some other respects, but there was nothing surprising in this. As Kelly himself notes, every party tends to look for organisational defects after a heavy defeat, and it is quite natural to see if anything can be learned from the winning side. But the Party Board was, in my view, a wholly appropriate response to the unique problems of the Conservative Party.

The old system tended to exaggerate existing tensions between the parliamentary party, the National Union, and Central Office. In the early days of my second spell as Chairman, I found that each section of the party was anxious to avoid its own responsibility by blaming everyone else. Having decided to get rid of institutional divisions, we had to ensure that the new body would represent the party as a whole. So we included representatives of the party in the House of Commons and the House of Lords; in Scotland and in Wales; in the European Parliament; in local government; and at Central Office. Obviously there also had to be a place for the Party Treasurer. In the *Blueprint for Change* we were imprecise about the number of Board members who would be elected, but at that stage we envisaged that it would be 'about half'. Yet given that twelve people who had to be on the Board *ex officio*, this would have resulted in an unwieldy body of twenty-four. So on further reflection we reduced the number of elected representatives to five out of the seventeen. But although the others are nominated, this hardly guarantees the leader an automatic majority. Many of the remaining twelve are themselves elected – like the Chairman of the 1922 Committee – and they represent interests which could be in conflict. Hopefully, since the various representatives now deliberate in the same room, a viable consensus will usually emerge. But I am convinced that the present composition of the Board ensures creative tension, where the old system caused destructive tension and the alternatives threatened deadlock. This has never been true of Labour's National Executive Committee, which has either been a rough house or a rubber stamp. At the first meeting of the Board I was able to canvass opinion around a single table – a refreshing change from the position I had experienced as Party Chairman between 1981 and 1983. From the Chairman's point of view it is a great advantage to feel that everyone is bound in by the decisions; but thanks to the reforms the voluntary party can be confident – for the first time – of having a meaningful role in the process of arriving at those decisions.

Kelly claims that the effect of the new Board was to 'nourish the party's top-down mentality', 'stifle grass-root initiatives' etc. I believe that this verdict can only rest on an unrealistic vision of how a political party can operate. Kelly does allow that the reforms as a whole have made party members feel that their voice counts for more. There might be a case for tinkering with the system of choosing the leader, but the principle of One Member One Vote is here to stay. The turnout in the ballot on the draft manifesto was indeed disappointing, and it may be the case that members

will need time before they grow accustomed to the new situation. On the other hand, the ballots on the reform programme and on European policy produced a big response. William did his best to encourage participation, and he has introduced new fora for policy input. If the members do not take advantage of these opportunities they will only have themselves to blame. At the same time, it would be ludicrous if the party leader had responsibility without any power.

After the election William was prepared to admit that he had not convinced the public that he was a Prime Minister in waiting. I remain convinced that the election would have been broadly similar, whatever he had said or done. But a potential Prime Minister has to take many crucial decisions on his own initiative, and even if William did make occasional mistakes he never flinched under the burden imposed by his office.

We should also be grateful to William for having inspired a revival of our fortunes in local government. When he took over we had sunk below the Liberal Democrats and it looked as though the only way was down. Now we are the second party of local government and on the same day as the disappointing general election we took control of six county councils. This is an essential platform for a lasting recovery, an unmistakable sign that under William's leadership we were recovering the trust of the voters. Again, it seems that William has actually suffered from this. Seeing the green shoots spring up, some members of our party expected the whole garden suddenly to look rosy again. But it was absurd to think that we could overcome our negative image of 1997 overnight, or even in a single Parliament.

Perhaps the same was true of the situation in Parliament itself. Everyone agrees that William got the better of Tony Blair day after day. His skill in overcoming the disadvantages faced by any opposition leader on these occasions will have led some people to think that it was all rather easy. It makes me wonder what would have happened if the arithmetic in the Commons had been different. If only William could have displayed his talents in a debate where the government looked in danger of defeat. That, after all, was the position when Margaret Thatcher forged her reputation as a damaging debator back in the 1970s.

As it was, William's regular victories over Blair have been written off as meaningless. I could understand his decision to lay down the leadership after such a dispiriting election result. I did not agree with all of his decisions. At times I felt that he listened to people who lacked the necessary experience of political life, and some of his very early photo-opportunities were ill-advised. It would be a tragedy if his abilities are lost to the party, and I hope that he will return to play a prominent role in the future. What is remarkable is his total lack of bitterness and acrimony.