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The Return of the Conservatives

Le retour des conservateurs

21 November 2017.

Andrew Gamble

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PREO

The Return of the Conservatives

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The Conservative Revival
The Brown Honeymoon
The Travails of Gordon Brown
The Financial Crash

- 1 Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party in June 2007. In the period that has elapsed since then, Labour's political fortunes have markedly deteriorated, while those of the Conservative party have strengthened, and by May 2009 the Conservatives were clear favourites to win the next election which was held on 6 May 2010. There was a brief honeymoon during July and August 2007, when Labour re-established a modest poll lead, and a period in the last three months of 2008, when Labour narrowed the Conservative lead because of its handling of the financial crisis, but in the period before and since, the Government has been beset by political difficulties and misjudgements, and a collapse of its support. Labour suffered some major electoral reverses in 2008, in both local government elections and in by-elections – The defeat of Ken Livingstone by Boris Johnson for Mayor of London, the loss of the safe seats in Crewe and Nantwich in May 2008 to the Conservatives and Glasgow East in July 2008 to the Scottish Nationalists being the worst. But in November 2008 on the strength of the renewed authority of

the Government during the financial crisis, Labour held on to Glenrothes, a constituency in Fife in Scotland, adjoining Gordon Brown's own constituency. In 2009 a renewed slump in the polls meant potentially a very difficult challenge for the party in the European Parliament elections. Although the party appeared to have regained some ground against the Scottish Nationalists, it still looked to be trailing badly behind the Conservatives in England, particularly in the South of England, and the possibility of Labour holding on to its parliamentary majority looked remote in May 2009.

The Conservative Revival

- 2 The Conservative revival is one of the most distinctive new developments in British politics in the last two years. It began soon after the party's third consecutive general election defeat in 2005, with the election of David Cameron to be the party's new leader. He was the fifth leader the party had had since 1997, and between 1997 and 2005 the party had three leaders – William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard who did not succeed in becoming Prime Minister. The last Conservative Leader not to become Prime Minister was Austen Chamberlain in the 1920s. Since 1992 after the Government lost its reputation for economic competence when it was forced to suspend sterling's membership of the Exchange Rate Mechanism and subsequently impose tax rises, Conservative electoral support dropped, and for thirteen years the party flatlined in the polls, rarely rising much above 30 per cent, and occasionally going lower. When Tony Blair was elected Labour Leader in 1994 he established a forty per cent lead over the Conservatives. In September 1994 Labour had over 60 per cent support, and the Conservatives only just over 20 per cent (Butler & Butler 2000).
- 3 What was most surprising about this record was not that the Conservatives did so badly before 1997, but that they did so badly after it. Before 1997 the Conservatives were in their fourth term as a government, the party was deeply divided over its European policy, it was still blamed for the economic recession and its aftermath in 1990-2, the Government was afflicted by a number of scandals, and it faced a rejuvenated Labour party under a charismatic new Leader. A general election defeat was highly likely, even if the scale of it, with Labour

gaining a 179 seat majority in the House of Commons was still surprising, not least to Tony Blair. What was more surprising was that after the defeat it took so long for the party to recover. Historically the Conservatives had always been very good at coming back after a general election defeat, even when it was a major one. After 1906 the Conservatives were back on equal terms with the Liberals by 1910, only the votes of the Irish Nationalist MPs keeping the Liberals in office. After 1945 which some thought at the time would put the Conservatives out for a generation, the Conservatives cut Labour's majority to single figures in 1950 and won the general election in 1951. After two election defeats in 1964 and 1966 the Conservatives regained office in 1970. In 1974 the party lost office again, but returned to government in 1979, and then ruled uninterruptedly for eighteen years.

- 4 The failure to bounce back after 1997 was unprecedented, and led to much debate within the party, especially when the failure extended for not one but two Parliaments. The Conservatives appeared to have fallen into a deep hole with no visible means of clambering out. One of their greatest difficulties was Tony Blair. His dominance of British politics made him seem unchallengable for a time, and many Conservatives appeared mesmerised by him, and unable to find a way of attacking him. There were deeper problems as well, however. The party seemed to suffer from a loss of sense of direction. Many Conservatives wanted to go back to the simplicities of Thatcherism, and resist any significant modernisation, while others argued that there needed to be major change in the party, its attitudes and its policies, if it was to be able to compete with Labour. Many of the pillars which had served the party so well in the past, such as Empire, the Union and its reputation for economic competence no longer seemed available. The Empire was no more, even Hong Kong had had to be returned to China, and all that was left was a few islands and enclaves. The Union was in considerable disarray with the Conservatives powerless to prevent the devolution of powers to Wales and Scotland, and the return of the first Scottish Parliament since the last one dissolved itself in 1707. Conservatives failed to win a single seat in either Scotland or Wales in 1997. The reputation for economic competence had been lost in 1992, and the smooth handling by Labour of the economy after 1997 gave the Conservatives no way back. By 2005, when the Labour Government won its third general election victory, despite the unpopularity

of its involvement in the war in Iraq, many began to wonder whether the Conservatives had a future (Gould 1999).

- 5 All that began to change after 2005, once David Cameron became Leader. Cameron won the leadership election against David Davis, who had been the front runner, but Davis was perceived by many in the party as likely to perpetuate the leadership style and policies of Hague, Duncan Smith and Howard, and after three failures many in the party were looking for something new. Cameron was relatively unknown. He had been a political adviser to Norman Lamont and to Michael Howard, but had only recently entered Parliament, in 2001, and like Tony Blair before him had never held a Cabinet post. He was also very young, still in his thirties. He was a strong contrast with David Davis because he came from an upper class family, was related to the Queen, and had been educated at Eton and Oxford where he was a member of the exclusive dining club, the Bullingdon Club, at the same time as George Osborne and Boris Johnson. David Davis had a working class background and was brought up on a council estate. His mother was a single parent. The Conservative party had had a succession of leaders – Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher, John Major, and William Hague – who did not have privileged backgrounds. Some candidates for the leadership, notably Douglas Hurd in 1990, had been forced to play down their upper class roots and connections which were considered a liability. But with Cameron the Conservatives reverted to their previous tradition, of giving due weight to birth and wealth. From the start the inner circle on which Cameron relied was heavily populated by old Etonians.
- 6 Cameron set out from the beginning to be a moderniser, and made it clear that he intended to initiate a sharp change of strategy. In doing so he picked up many of the ideas and some of the supporters of Michael Portillo, who had first seriously explored what a modernisation strategy might involve for the Conservative party after his return to Parliament and the Conservative front bench in 1999. Portillo had been one of Margaret Thatcher's most passionate supporters, and through the 1990s when he served in John Major's cabinet, he was widely seen as Thatcher's preferred heir and the leader of the Thatcherite wing of the parliamentary party. He almost stood against Major for the leadership when Major suddenly resigned in 1995 and challenged his opponents in the party to stand against him. His de-

cision not to do so was partly because he was widely expected to become Leader after the Conservatives were defeated in the next election. This turned out to be a miscalculation however because he lost his seat in the 1997 Labour landslide and was therefore not eligible to be a candidate.

- 7 When he returned to Parliament he was a very different politician, because he had largely abandoned many of his former Thatcherite beliefs, and had concluded that the Conservative party must adopt a very different strategy if it was to regain support and return to government. The party had to acknowledge the depth of its unpopularity, and how out of touch it had become with modern Britain. It had to learn from Tony Blair and New Labour if it was ever to recapture the middle ground of British politics. It could not afford to wait until the electorate tired of New Labour and returned to the Conservatives. For this to be possible the Conservatives had to change. Portillo argued that this meant not just accepting some of the economic changes Labour had introduced, but also the social changes. The Conservatives had to become socially liberal if it was to connect with the mood of modern Britain, and in particular the younger generation.
- 8 Portillo set about trying to communicate this vision to the Conservatives, and although he attracted a great deal of support, particularly from members of the Shadow Cabinet, he became distrusted by many of his former supporters on the Right of the party. After William Hague resigned in 2001, following the second (and unprecedented) landslide defeat of the party, Portillo was favourite to succeed, but in the initial ballot of MPs he very narrowly lost to Kenneth Clarke and Iain Duncan Smith, and was eliminated from the next stage. Duncan Smith emerged victorious. This appeared a huge setback for the modernisers in the party, especially since Duncan Smith was an even stronger and more unrepentant Thatcherite than William Hague. Neither Clarke nor Portillo served in his Shadow Cabinet. After this failure Michael Portillo lost his appetite for politics, and left Parliament in 2005 to concentrate on a media career.
- 9 Cameron embraced Portillo's vision of what a modernised Conservative party should be like and set about implementing it. From the start this appeared to be deliberately copying elements that Labour had

employed in the 1990s. New Labour had been a slogan which came to be adopted by the media and by friends and enemies as though the party really had changed its name (Gould 1999). The Conservatives attempted something similar. What Cameron sought more than anything was to make the party likeable and trustworthy again. This meant taking up a number of unfamiliar issues for Conservatives, and invading the territory of other parties. For a considerable period Cameron's Conservatives took up positions which were to the left of Labour, just as Labour under Blair had delighted in taking up positions just to the right of the Conservatives. This strategy had the merit of confounding expectations, and forcing people to re-evaluate the Conservatives. Cameron was adept in particular at identifying the Conservatives with the environment, with global poverty, with multiculturalism and with a more open and tolerant society. He revelled in the title 'heir to Blair', and the care with which the Conservatives studied Blair and imitated him was the biggest tribute they could have given to him. Cameron tried constantly to separate Blair from his party, and particularly from Gordon Brown. Although Brown was as much part of the New Labour project as Tony Blair, it suited Cameron to portray Brown as the representative of old Labour, who would seek to reverse much of the legacy of Blair, which would therefore only be safe in the hands of the Conservatives.

- 10 In the early stages of his leadership Cameron's main aim was to make the Conservatives electable again, by changing the style and culture of the party, and dispelling the usual images which had come to define the party. He was rewarded with modest success. During 2006 the Conservative vote moved into the range of 35-39 per cent, which gave the party leads of 5 to 8 per cent over Labour. This was significant because it ended the long period of flatlining around 30 per cent, and it did put the Conservatives ahead, but it was not at this stage a breakthrough. It was nothing like the very large opinion poll leads which Labour had enjoyed between 1994 and 1997. Cameron's personal ratings were also not particularly good, and generally lagged those of his party. He was clearly a much more likeable Conservative Leader than some of his predecessors, but many voters did not seem convinced that he had enough substance. His similarity in certain respects to Blair was not necessarily a positive thing for many voters, since Blair's star had waned, and his style was increasingly criticised.

- 11 Cameron brought the Conservatives some success but he met with a considerable opposition within his own party. This was led by some standard bearers of the Thatcherite wing of the party such as Norman Tebbit, and also by columnists such as Simon Heffer. There was also considerable unease expressed by Conservative activists on the new ConservativeHome website, set up by Tim Montgomerie, who had been an aide to Iain Duncan Smith. What the critics most disliked was the attempt to align the Conservatives with the liberal attitudes of metropolitan media and intellectual elites, downplaying traditional Conservative messages on tax, immigration and Europe. Many Conservatives saw all these issues as popular ones, particularly for core Conservative voters, and feared many of these voters would be lost to parties like the UK Independence party (UKIP), which was mostly composed of former Conservatives. There was no need they argued for any change in the style and image of the Conservative party. Making the Conservatives palatable to liberal opinion was exactly the wrong way to go about creating a Conservative majority, and even if one were achieved, its hands would be tied by having accepted so much of the agenda of its opponents.
- 12 The Conservatives undoubtedly faced a difficult moment in the summer of 2007. Blair was being forced to step down earlier than he had intended because of the level of disaffection with his leadership, and the remorseless campaign waged against him by Gordon Brown and his allies. Waiting for Blair to depart seemed to cause the Conservatives to stall, and they began to stumble on a number of issues, such as their policy on grammar schools, which for many Conservatives, including some on the front bench, should not be undermined in any way. Cameron was more concerned with making it clear that the Conservatives stood for all citizens and wanted education and health services which worked for everyone and not just for a privileged few. But this conflicted with the traditional Conservative concern for defending excellence and independence, and levelling up rather than levelling down.
- 13 When Blair did finally resign, it was a great relief for the Conservatives. The master magician who had bewitched the electorate for thirteen years had departed, and normal politics could resume again. Many Tories felt a visceral dislike for Blair, in part perhaps because Blair had at times in his career appeared more Conservative than

many Conservatives. Cameron never seems to have shared this dislike, and indeed at times did not bother to hide his admiration for Blair. This was particularly obvious in Blair's final Commons appearance. At the end of his speech Cameron rose to his feet and encouraged all his MPs to do the same, to give Blair a standing ovation. It was typical of Cameron and of his politics. Anti-Blair Conservatives, particularly in the media, thought it was despicable, one of most shameful moments in modern British political history according to one of them¹.

The Brown Honeymoon

- 14 Conservative hopes that a Brown premiership would see the return of politics as usual with the Conservatives in the ascendancy were at first disappointed. For a few months Brown performed strongly, and the Conservatives faltered. Brown introduced a marked change of style to the office of Prime Minister, and the novelty of it proved popular. There was simple relief at the fact that Brown was not Blair. He appeared to be businesslike, sober, and pragmatic. He talked a lot about his moral compass. He avoided the cameras and got on with the task of running the country. There was no longer a celebrity or an actor in Downing Street, and for a while it seemed that this new style might succeed. The Government's fortunes began to recover, and as the Conservatives stumbled so Labour re-established a firm lead in the opinion polls through July and August 2007.
- 15 This unexpected Labour bounce caused consternation in the Conservative party, and led to murmurings against Cameron and against the direction he was taking the party. There was disquiet that against Brown he appeared lightweight and inexperienced. During that summer of 2007 when Parliament was in recess there were a number of mini crises – floods, an outbreak of foot and mouth disease, and a terrorism incident. In each case Brown appeared to offer calm, strong leadership. He had to do very little, but the impression was conveyed that this was a Prime Minister who might establish a strong bond with the electorate. As Labour's poll lead mounted so did the speculation about an early election. Under the British parliamentary system there was no need to hold an election until 2010. Brown did not need popular endorsement to become Prime Minister, only the endorse-

ment of a parliamentary majority and an invitation from the Sovereign. But the British popular press, never very well informed about the British constitution, had run the story that Brown lacked legitimacy because he had never been elected as Prime Minister in the way that Tony Blair had been. In a parliamentary system no Prime Minister is ever directly elected, but the analogy with presidential systems both in France and in the United States, meant that the British Prime Minister was increasingly viewed as though he or she was a President, and received a personal mandate through a general election. Brown could have used this as an excuse for holding a general election half way through a Parliament, and since Britain has no codified constitution, the Queen would have granted his request for a dissolution. A group of his advisers urged him to do just that, arguing that there would never be a better time to secure a Labour majority. The first signs of the credit crunch were appearing, and everyone expected the economic circumstances to become more difficult over the next two years, although no-one imagined how difficult. The counter argument was that the Labour boost in the polls might be illusory and might quickly melt away once an election was called. If Brown called an election and lost he would be the shortest serving Prime Minister in British history. He had waited and schemed so long to be Prime Minister that it was almost unthinkable that he should risk throwing it all away, when he was sure of being Prime Minister until 2010.

- 16 These arguments were finely balanced, too finely balanced perhaps. With hindsight Brown should have decided clearly one way or the other at the beginning of September. Instead he held back, which was characteristic of him but fatal, and allowed the speculation to continue, apparently hoping that something would happen which would make the decision easier to take. It was a serious miscalculation, compounded by the tactical advantage that seemed to accrue from keeping the Conservatives guessing about the Government's intentions. At the beginning of September the Conservatives were in some disarray, because they feared the Government was about to announce a snap election, one which the Conservatives feared they would lose. There was a great deal of speculation about the difficulties that Cameron would face at his party conference in September, and Brown and some of his advisers clearly hoped to embarrass

Cameron further and make the Conservative party further divided by letting the speculation run.

- 17 If this was the calculation it spectacularly backfired. With their backs to the wall the Conservatives turned the situation to their advantage. The leadership used the Conference to appeal for unity, and George Osborne announced an initiative to reduce inheritance tax drastically which as expected won instant and enthusiastic support from the party rank and file. Far from dividing the party further the Conference united it, against the imminent threat of an election and a further defeat. The result was a significant poll bounce for the Conservatives. Calling an election now would be high risk, and Brown duly announced that there would be no election. But what would have been an announcement from a position of strength a week before, now looked like a confession of weakness. No-one believed that Brown would have made the announcement had the Conservatives not just had a good week and increased their poll support. What made it then worse was that Brown when asked about this categorically denied that the shift in the polls had had anything to do with his decision not to hold an early election. This created incredulity, and led to the first major collapse in his personal support, and the puncturing of the short honeymoon. He was never to enjoy positive ratings again. The episode revealed something about Brown as a politician, and made him look both incompetent, and also devious.

The Travails of Gordon Brown

- 18 The tactical error over the election brought the first steep plunge in the polls, and this proved not be a temporary blip, but a new trend. The Government began to stumble in its response to events, and what had seemed calm, decisive leadership in the summer, was now portrayed as the reverse. The collapse of Northern Rock in September 2007, following the first run on a British bank for more than a hundred years, was a harbinger of much worse to come. The Government's cautious approach pleased no-one. It failed to act decisively, either letting the bank fail, or nationalising it outright. Nationalisation was to come, forced on the Government the next year, when the position of Northern Rock became completely unsustainable (Peston 2008).

- 19 There were many other mistakes which damaged the Government's reputation and that of the Prime Minister. The Government refused to sanction the backdating of an increase in police pay by a few months. The Scottish executive however agreed to pay the increase in full. That left Gordon Brown in the embarrassing position of opposing a rise in pay for police officers in England, while police officers living in his own constituency in Scotland were receiving it. Another embarrassment was Brown's behaviour over the Lisbon summit, at which the constitutional treaty was to be signed. Brown attended the summit, but not in time for the signing ceremony, because he claimed he had urgent business in the House of Commons. Arrangements were made for him to sign the Treaty on his own later in the day. This behaviour brought general derision. It dismayed the other Heads of Government, it outraged pro-European opinion in Britain, but it also did nothing to placate majority Eurosceptic opinion, since Brown had after all signed the Treaty they opposed. It just made him look ridiculous, and this became the refrain of his domestic critics, that he was incapable of acting decisively and had failed to make the transition from being Chancellor to Prime Minister.
- 20 The opposition parties understandably made huge capital from Gordon Brown's misfortunes, but this was compounded by the anxieties of many in the Labour party that Brown seemed unable to give the Government a new direction or purpose. Many people had wanted Brown to take over from Blair because they believed he would give the party a more social democratic policy and image, and would get rid of many of the unpopular aspects of Blair's policies. But it quickly became clear that apart from a few minor changes, such as cancelling plans for a super casino in Manchester, Brown intended to continue all of Blair's policies. Polly Toynbee and other columnists pleaded for at least one symbolic policy, such as cancelling ID cards or the replacement for Trident nuclear missiles or immediate withdrawal from Iraq, which would indicate that the party was different and moving in a new direction. Toynbee listed twelve such possible policies, which would signal a serious social democratic intent, and argued that just one would do. Not even one was forthcoming.
- 21 The disillusion in Labour's ranks was profound. Clare Short, the former Development Minister, who had been one of Tony Blair's most trenchant critics, described Brown's policy as 'Blairism without the

charm'. A minister in the government adapted some well-known lines of English verse: 'Yesterday upon the stair I met a man who wasn't Blair. He wasn't Blair again today. I wish, I wish he'd go away'. The British media, never known for its balance or sense of proportion, weighed in with a series of extraordinary attacks. There was a concerted attempt, particularly by the Conservative newspapers, at character assassination of Brown. He was labelled a ditherer, a bully, a micro-manager, an obsessive, and above all a gloomy, dour Scot, who was not fit to be Prime Minister. Everything from his past was raked up and used against him².

- 22 Given the ferocity of the assault from all sides in the autumn of 2007 it was hardly surprising that the ratings both of Gordon Brown and of the Government should have plunged. During the first half of 2008 Brown was the most unpopular Prime Minister ever, and the Conservatives had moved into a commanding poll lead, the kind which they had not enjoyed before under Cameron's leadership, or at any time since 1997. There was a clear shift in the climate of opinion, and a widespread feeling that the Conservatives were coming back. Looked at historically there did seem to be some longer cycles at work. The Conservative decline had begun sixteen years before in 1992. They had been in the ascendancy for the previous sixteen years, starting in 1976 with the economic crisis and the IMF bailout of that year. The fifteen years before that Labour had been (rather less securely) in the ascendancy, after the economic difficulties of 1961. Before that there had been a rather shorter twelve year cycle after the 1949 devaluation of sterling in which the Conservatives had been dominant. From this perspective 2008 looked like a turning point, the end of the long period of Labour ascendancy, and the transition to a new period of Conservative dominance.
- 23 During the first half of 2008 things went from bad to worse for the government. One of the most extraordinary errors was the Government decision in the 2008 budget to withdraw the 10p income tax band, which had especially benefited lower income groups. It had been announced by Gordon Brown a year before, but its full implications only became apparent during 2008, and it led to a major rebellion by Labour MPs, many of whom could not understand why a Labour Government was setting out to make many of the worst paid people in Britain worse off. David Cameron gleefully seized the issue

to attack the Government for hitting the low paid. It was deeply wounding to the Government's reputation and contributed to speculation that Brown would be gone by Christmas 2008. In the summer of 2008 a growing number of people inside and outside the Labour party had concluded that he did not have the qualities to be an effective Prime Minister.

- 24 This situation presented an open goal for the Conservatives, and they took full advantage. Apart from the string of political mistakes the Government made, the economic situation was steadily worsening through 2008 as the credit crunch took hold. The Conservatives highlighted Gordon Brown's own stewardship of the economy since 1997 as Chancellor of the Exchequer, and blamed the economic problems on him. The Government countered that the crisis was an international crisis, and that it originated in the United States and had nothing to do with the domestic management of the economy. The Conservatives kept trying to underline the point however that compared with many other economies Britain was less well prepared to face a recession, because of the high levels of public debt which the Government had tolerated, due to its desire to keep public spending rising (Peston 2008). The slogan the Conservatives adopted was that Labour had failed to mend the roof when the sun was shining. Another factor which worked in their favour was that Labour increasingly appeared disunited. There were moves to force a leadership election, and David Miliband, the Foreign Secretary, let it be known that he was available.

The Financial Crash

- 25 At the beginning of September few commentators expected Brown to survive the rest of the year, although the precise nature of his ousting was unclear. It seemed unthinkable however that the party could endure another year of such unrelenting punishment with the same leader. What rescued him was the sudden escalation of the credit crunch into a major financial crisis, the greatest crisis to hit the world capitalist economy since the Great Crash of 1929 (Gamble 2009). For a brief period in September the world financial system wobbled and might have collapsed, with incalculable consequences. It was only

rescued by draconian and quite exceptional rescue efforts by governments and central banks.

- 26 For a few months the crash helped Gordon Brown and wrong-footed the Conservatives. This was counter-intuitive, since he had been in charge for such a long time, and might have been held directly responsible for the mess that had been created. In the United States the financial crash and looming recession did great damage to the Republicans, because many Americans blamed it on the economic policies of George Bush. John McCain, the Republican candidate, was not himself responsible for those policies, but he took some of the blame for them, and after the middle of September with this issue dominating, his chances of winning the White House evaporated. In Britain however the initial impact of the crisis was to reprieve Gordon Brown. He had a successful party conference at which against the backdrop of the crisis he was able to present himself as a serious man for serious times, and used a phrase aimed at both David Cameron and David Miliband: 'this is no time for a novice'. Brown paraded his experience of international economic management to good effect, and seemed transformed by the crisis. There was a new assertiveness and decisiveness, a readiness to take risks. In contrast to the slow pace of Government decisions over the previous twelve months, the Government acted quickly to nationalise Bradford and Bingley building society, to shore up one of the largest banks HBOS by arranging for Lloyds Bank to take it over, and announcing a £50 billion bailout for the financial sector, to support not just HBOS, but the Royal Bank of Scotland which was in difficulty, and any other bank which required help.
- 27 Brown presented himself as a global statesman, the one politician in Britain who might be able to broker international agreements to bring an end to the crisis. In another sign of confidence Peter Mandelson, one of Brown's bitterest enemies, was brought back from his role as European Commissioner in Brussels to be Business Secretary. Mandelson's return ended any question of a Blairite challenge to Brown's leadership, and it reinforced the message that the Government was a government of experience for difficult times. Mandelson and Brown had been two of the original architects of New Labour, so the re-establishment of their alliance seemed to signal the revival of the new Labour project, although in very altered circumstances, be-

cause neo-liberalism was discredited and no longer set the parameters for economic policy. The result of all this was that Labour which had appeared dead in the water now showed new signs of life. The party was interesting again to the media, and there was some improvement in Gordon Brown's ratings, and a distinct narrowing of the Conservative lead in the opinion polls.

- 28 Although Labour began to close the gap, however, it remained considerable, and at no time did Labour establish a lead or really look as though it were going to re-establish its political ascendancy. Its best hope was that the Conservatives were extremely discomfited by the crisis, and forced on to the back foot. The novice charge rankled because it was so evidently true. More serious was that the party was so strongly identified with the City and with the financial growth model which had dominated British economic policy since the 1980s. It had been pioneered by the Conservatives, and they had assumed in all their planning for government that it would continue. They had talked repeatedly of matching Labour's plans for public spending, and using the dividend of growth to do so, while directing some of the dividend to private incomes. The end of the assumptions about growth and the predictions of unparalleled austerity, greater even than in the Thatcher years, meant that the Conservatives faced a politics of hard choices for which they were not at all prepared. It was not the kind of economy which Cameron had expected to inherit. In these circumstances it was not surprising that for a while the policy response of the Conservatives was uncertain. They were also distracted by reminders of the Bullingdon Club past of leading Conservatives, and concerns of whether the image of the Conservative party as a party of 'toffs' would play well during a recession.
- 29 The Conservatives however held their nerve and from the beginning of 2009 events and the polls turned back in their favour. Although Brown was to score another major success at the G20 summit in London in April, the tide of bad economic news on jobs and incomes eroded support for the Government. The budget in April 2009 with its itemisation of the colossal debts which had been incurred to rescue the financial system, and the consequences for future public spending and taxation, allowed the Conservatives to mount a full-scale attack on Labour profligacy, and Labour's responsibility for the economic mess. Conservatives gleefully pointed out that every previ-

ous Labour Government had presided over a major financial crisis – 1931, 1949, 1967, and 1976. Now the same had happened again, even if it had taken rather longer to arrive. It was clear from the polls that part of this message was reaching the electorate. Labour had now lost the advantage it had held over the Conservatives for being the party of economic competence which it had enjoyed since 1992.

- 30 The scale of the global economic crisis and the implosion of the growth model on which both Conservatives and new Labour had relied made it almost impossible for Labour to create a plausible narrative about the crisis or what they intended to do about it. They remained generally cautious, resting their hopes on a relatively early end to the recession, and the return to something like normality. They were not equipped or disposed to thinking radical thoughts about the reconstruction of the economy along different lines. The top rate of income tax was raised to 50p in the budget, but this was largely token, and there seemed much less appetite for serious reregulation of the banking sector.
- 31 On top of this the litany of mistakes and miscalculations resumed to devastating effect, and by May 2009, with the revelations about MPs expenses, the plan to spread malicious rumours about political opponents by a close aide of the Prime Minister, Damian McBride, and the failure in the eyes of the public to respond to the campaign to allow former Ghurkha soldiers and their families to settle in Britain, the Government was once again plummeting to new depths in the opinion polls, and there was renewed speculation about how long the Government could continue. Although the Conservatives were also hurt by the revelations about MPs expenses, the main damage looked likely to be incurred by Labour as the governing party. The general election was now only one year away, and the Conservatives, with firm leads of 20 per cent in the opinion polls, had become overwhelming favourites to win it, which they eventually did but with no overall majority.

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1 Private communication from a leading Conservative journalist.

2 Much use was made of the critical biography by Bower, Tom (2007). *Gordon Brown Prime Minister* London : HarperPerennial.

English

Gordon Brown succeeded Tony Blair as Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party in June 2007. In the period that has elapsed since then, Labour's political fortunes have markedly deteriorated, while those of the Conservative party have strengthened, and by May 2009 the Conservatives were clear favourites to win the next election which was held on 6 May 2010. One year before the election, this paper offered an assessment of the Conservatives' assets and liabilities.

Français

Gordon Brown a succédé à Tony Blair à la tête du gouvernement et du parti travailliste en juin 2007. Depuis cette période, les chances de succès du parti travailliste ont nettement diminué tandis que celles des Conservateurs ont augmenté si bien que, dès mai 2009, ces derniers étaient donnés comme les grands vainqueurs des élections qui ont eu lieu le 6 mai 2010. Un an avant les élections législatives, l'article dresse un bilan de leurs atouts et de leurs points faibles.

Andrew Gamble

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