



TROUBLES AT THE TOPS

With leadership woes affecting all the parties, this year's conference season has been less productive than usual



By Andrew Rennison
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Don King is wasting his time every moment he spends in Las Vegas, smiling inely whilst sandwiched between two steroid-happy heavyweights. These days, the real promotional goldmine resides in Downing Street: Blair vs Brown – 'This time, it's political'.

And a new peak in this colossal bout was reached with the recent Labour conference; what a shame that Mr King was not there to mediate a press conference between the reigning champ and the reigning Chancellor. Then again, the idea of either man in just boxing trunks may have made for uncomfortable viewing. Nevertheless, in Brighton there was undoubtedly only this single contest on everyone's lips.

Perhaps aware of the grand occa-

sion, Mr Brown did not fail to rise up to it. In an energetic address, the Chancellor spoke at times more like a current leader than one in waiting, referring to his prime minister more than once in the past tense.

Delivering a broad vision of Britain's future in a commanding style, Mr Brown also added a number of personal points, speaking of his values and moral outlook bestowed by his parents and heritage. This perhaps more than any other element delivered a sense of authority.

Its members received these projections warmly, and though Mr Brown made it clear that the current New Labour direction will remain relatively in tact under his command, many Labour supporters see him as a potential return to a more traditional Labour attitude.

And so came the turn of the Prime Minister; rarely can he have felt the heat beneath him quite so acutely.

In an attempt to dampen the fuss over his rival, Mr Blair's address was heavy on policy and assertive regarding his future. Giving no date for his resignation, the PM implied that he had many years left in him as he reeled

off further proposals and objectives.

Many later scoffed at his claim that with hindsight he would have taken many reforms further, viewing that as something of an excuse for current failings. Yet Mr Blair's speech came across as reasonably strong.

One notable exception to this view,

however, would have to be the Prime Minister's assertion that Labour had won the 'battle of values' in Britain. This claim seemed particularly lightweight by the end of a conference that saw the government defeated in four member votes regarding future policy.

Every one of these defeats con-

cerned issues of New versus Old Labour values: council housing, pensions, industrial action and private sector involvement in the NHS. In each case the government forwarded a generally right-wing proposal; in each case they were rebuffed by the votes of their party.

The notion therefore that Mr Blair has won a battle of values in Britain seems rather questionable when there seems to be no consensus on ideals even within his own party.

Personifying this issue is Walter Wolfgang, an 82 year-old Labour member physically ejected from the conference after shouting 'nonsense' during Jack Straw's address on the Wednesday. Though triumphantly returning to the venue 24 hours later, Mr Wolfgang's run-in with Labour's over-zealous minds appears to symbolise how far from standing united, Britain's ruling party is both fragmented and increasingly authoritarian.

The championship bout over No. 10 may be of small consequence compared to the danger that this internal division poses, but with both the Tories and the Lib Dems also struggling for unity, will anybody notice?



BLAIR: Up for a fight

BLACKPOOL PLEASURE SPEECH



By Andrew Mickel
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Whilst this year saw Labour and the Lib Dems wrestle with leadership questions for the first time in eleven and seven years respectively, it is one of the few areas where the Tories are on home ground. There isn't even a pretence to be looking at other issues; this year, Blackpool is about infighting, and nothing else.

Many of the roles the candidates are assuming are familiar. The probable winner from the right of the party is David Davis; the mantle of the radical but barking contender clearly belongs to Liam Fox; and no leadership contest would be complete without Ken Clarke. However, amongst all the usual contenders, there's someone new to contest the position.

Hailed as the Tories' Tony Blair, David Cameron has modernising beliefs and is a rousing speaker to call the party to arms. The party and media alike seem to have placed all of their future hopes for the party on the shoulders of Cameron and the shadow chancellor George Osborne. Part of the group of young MPs loosely labelled the 'Notting Hill set', they have quickly become the basis for a *Telegraph* wet dream that the party could actual-

ly get back on track.

But what is there to suggest that they would be better able to lead the party than the older candidates? Cameron in particular has certainly been quick to use Blairite language, which many seem to consider a step into the future (although compared to the language used before, it may seem like a remarkable revolution to conference-goers in Blackpool). However, it won't be long until the parallels with Blair - a man already seen by many people as a spent force - becomes a heavy weight around his neck.

As for support within his own party, the few MPs who back him are not generally recognised as being the future face of the Conservatives: Anne Widdecombe and Nicholas Soames are already an embarrassment to the party of today, let alone tomorrow. Even his background - from Eton to Oxford, then up through the party ranks - has Old Tory written all over it.

There also isn't any policy sub-

stance to explain his popularity. His much-vaunted flat tax idea - which would disadvantage the middle classes the most - won't win him any friends with the *Daily Mail*, and a Tory leader without their support isn't a leader at all. Meanwhile, much has been said about how inexperienced he is, yet to elect an MP who has only sat for one full Parliament is absurd.

This year's conference is as much about trying to find a place for the party in the 21st century as it is to find a leader in the immediate future. After all, only a quarter of young people voted Tory in the last election, and their support is at as low a point as any time in the past 13 years. As the party's future has never been shrouded in as much uncertainty as it is now it isn't surprising to see them grab at any potential candidate. But there's little to suggest that David Cameron can or will be that man now, or even necessarily in the future.



CAMERON: Forehead still present

Yellow in peril



By Claire King
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For Charles Kennedy at this year's Liberal Democrat Party Conference, the leadership issue attached itself to him like a large and very irritating albatross.

Unfortunately for Kennedy, no amount of enthusiastic applause from his supporters could suppress the grumblings and discontent of concerned Lib Dems worried about the party's future. After success in the general election, the atmosphere should have been one of celebration and hope.

However, the likely change in Tory leadership from demon headmaster Michael Howard to the (marginally) more voter-friendly Kenneth Clarke could potentially reduce Lib Dem support. Similarly, when Gordon Brown assumes Labour leadership, those who were unhappy with the Blairite reign are likely to once again proudly pin on their little red ribbons in support of Labour.

The crux of Kennedy's problem is that he is unwilling to assert the position of his party. If Clarke is successful in securing the position

of Tory leader, he has expressed interest in forming a coalition with the Liberal Democrats to help him gain power.

Therefore, pressure is mounting on Kennedy to take a more right-wing stance, instead of the currently confused mixture of left-wing policies with regard to Iraq and taxation and the right-wing plans to abolish the department of Trade and Industry, aspects of the New Deal, and the Child Trust Fund.

Kennedy made several resonant speeches at the conference, which were met with reassuring bursts of applause from animated supporters. But beneath the surface of this Lib Dem foray, unrest regarding the party leader seems to have been brewing.

Embarrassingly, he even found it necessary to confirm that he does genuinely still wish to become Prime Minister. It's an unusual - and one would hope unnecessary - assertion for a man speaking at his seventh conference as party leader.

Two issues were 'referred back' (in other words, rejected) by party supporters - the plans to privatise the Post Office and the European budget - yet another symbol of the somewhat waning support for Chatshow Charlie.

By the end of the conference, journalists could openly ask Kennedy the question that more and more people are asking: "you have made it clear you are not going to resign: why not?"