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Like Leo Sayer, only taller

Bourne to be mild



BARKING: I give it ten minutes until their arms get tired and they start using sandwich boards

I've always made it a point to not write about the Conservatives. Especially when you're in the lefty-liberal world of university, there are two simple default positions to take about the party. They've truly crystallized now David Cameron is in charge: either the party is a spent political force that's obsessed with pandering to the middle classes, or they're now on the road back to Number 10, having been overhauled by a man with the Pilsbury Doughboy's face.

But – and I'd imagine these are words that have never crossed your mind before – what about the Welsh Conservatives? Last week saw their party conference, and was hailed by some as a turning point. The party has decided it now likes the Welsh Assembly and wants to keep it. This is quite obviously a good idea when you think about the poor bastard Tory politicians who have so far had to pitch their stand in the Assembly with the 'we want to dissolve our employer' cloud hanging over their heads.

They've been overhauled by a man with the Pilsbury Doughboy's face

The Welsh Tory party is perhaps stronger than you would think. Unfathomably, they are the largest opposition party in the Assembly, and having shadowed their election candidate in the General Election last May, they were definitely more popular on doorsteps than you might suspect. No one threw a brick or anything.

But the Welsh party simply can't become a party of its own and embrace what devolution should be about. Ol' Doughface was the big attraction at Llandudno last weekend, and I expect few people in Wales will have any idea who the Welsh Tory leader is (it's Nick Bourne, which I mention purely for

headline writing purposes).

Still, this week I've come to gently love this photo of the Welsh Conservatives on the front page of their website. It nicely sums up what the party has become: a random collection of half-formed ideas, slung together to slag off the Government with no real alternative plan. All that's left is a collection of visual soundbites that don't make it even remotely clear what they are there for. 'No Quango Bonfire'? What on Earth is that supposed to mean? Do they want a bonfire? Are they against quango bonfires? And has anyone outside the Tory party actually used the word quango since 1998?

It makes the Welsh Conservatives seem a bit like an unhinged friend who'll say anything, as long as it makes you remember that they are there. Not that I know any of them personally (actually my sister's a party member, but that's a story for another day), but they seem like they're on the constant verge of blurting out things like 'he doesn't want to see you anymore,' or 'she'll have the side salad'.

So where can the party go from here? Doughface's assertion at the close of the conference that he didn't want people to tell him he was making changes too quickly is somewhat unjustified when no-one knows what that is. Which is why the party is currently condemned to keep making nutso blurtings like the sign massacre above: to create any real policies of their own is just too hard.

Ultimately, the real opposition to Labour in the Assembly, if not Parliament, is done by the Lib Dems – especially given their experience in government, they are the only one of the three opposition parties who have a handle on what the heck is going on.

In the meantime, the Welsh Tories are going to suffer the same problems as their parent party. Although they've convinced themselves they are on the road to real change, it's so superficial that nothing has really changed.

Compact Con-artists

Sod the discount booze and the 'learning' opportunities; probably the best perk of being a student is the cheap newspapers. It's always seemed like a bit of a nuts idea to me, although admittedly one we do quite well out of. Obviously the papers think they're building up a dedicated future audience. In practice they're breeding a generation of people who are used to being able to buy one out of their pocket shrapnel, and will balk at the idea of paying a pound for pulped tree.

But at least if you were to pick up the *Guardian*, the *Times* or the *Telegraph* then you'll be getting value for your (huge pile of) money. But the most student hungry of the 'quality' press, the *Independent*, seems to have given up even pretending to be newspaper. Although it has given up using chocolate to bribe us to buy it, it's still suffering from a remarkable absence of any of that 'news' stuff that everyone's been

talking about.

The screechy front covers have already been widely acknowledged as tired. Now it seems to be dragging down the whole paper into becoming a left-wing *Daily Mail*.

It used to be an excellent niche newspaper that made enterprising use of its few available resources by using carefully principled journalism. It's not long since the *Sindy* set about pushing for real mental health reform. These days the principles are based upon what will draw in the highest audience: health scares, statistical barking and, dare I say it, Fair Trade (head on over to Letters if you think I've been curiously quiet about the enviro-fascists this week).

In terms of how detached from reality and how merrily it will now jump on any bandwagon, it's now no better than the *Daily Express* and its Inheritance Tax Crusade. Just look at this issue from last Wednesday. Sod the fact that the Government had just lost a crucial ID card vote in the Lords, and there was more violence in Iraq than you could shake a civil war at. Instead, it's barking on about International Women's Day - worthy, certainly, but not news.

It's quite clearly now become a lifestyle paper. Students don't buy it for actual news; they buy it because it makes you look good. That certainly isn't what being a 'quality compact' should be about. Such aspirational values have 'tabloid' written through it like a stick of rock.

There's nothing wrong with being a tabloid; hell, look at us, we're perfectly happy down here in the gutter. But it says something of the sheer snobbery of students that so many people have fallen for the 'quality compact' schtick.



ACADEMIC PURGATORY

NOW THAT the autumn semester's exam season is finally behind us, our thoughts aren't turning to the summer exams. They're two months away, for goodness sake, pull yourself together.

But there is hopefully one part of the university that is. Students do pretty much just three things with their holidays: travel, work or go on work experience. All three of them need you to know when you are free during the holidays. And that is where the problem lies.

Every year, the Academic Registry seem to leave it later and later until they actually bother telling us when our exams will be. I'm half expecting that this year they will just idly text me the location of all my exams half an hour before they start.



It's more than just an annoyance, as it limits the options of where you can apply to go on work experience, or what dates you could apply for jobs for. Having lost out on work because of this problem before, it isn't a hypothetical situation: it's something that actually costs students money.

This year I was planning to move to Canada in June and now I'm going to be unable to move until July, just because I don't know what will be happening with exams. Goddamnit, I want to escape, not sit exams.

So why is it left so late here? Other universities get their provisional exam timetables much sooner than we do. Hell, even if we lose to Oxbridge in terms of academic study, hypothetical boat races and virtually everything else, early exam timetables could become Cardiff's strength.

So is there any chance that the Registry could give us a bit more notice as to what the heck is going on?