Do the Conservatives Need an A List?

Local Associations have traditionally held the lead role when it comes to selecting Conservative parliamentary candidates. Cameron's attempt to take control through an “A List” of candidates has run into significant resistance.

CAMERON’S ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEM AND THE INFLUENCE OF LABOUR’S EXAMPLE

David Cameron first raised the question of an ‘A-list’ as a basis for broadening the Conservatives’ Commons representation during his successful campaign for the party leadership. Once he had won the contest, it immediately emerged as a priority issue for the new leader.

Conservative Central Office has for decades had an approved list of candidates. The list was long (over a thousand names) and, as the author can testify, it was not difficult to secure inclusion following a bout of form-filling, interviews at Central Office, and (eventually) a training weekend. Approved candidates were then free to apply to any local association where a vacancy existed; in a remarkably decentralised party structure the local associations in their turn were effectively able to choose the candidate of their choice.

Unsurprisingly, the approved list of candidates was dominated by white, professional men, and the parliamentary candidates eventually adopted were still more so.

By the 2001 General Election, the party fielded 93 female candidates (up 27 on 1997), though this was still 65 fewer than Labour. More significantly, only one of the 38 new Conservative MPs was female. Only one ethnic minority candidate, an Asian, was selected in a winnable seat, though he was defeated in the election. In 2005, the number of women running as Conservatives had risen to 122, though few contested winnable seats, and only 17 were successful. The party selected ethnic minority representatives in 41 constituencies, most of them quite hopeless targets. The party’s first black MP won the safe Windsor seat, while an Asian candidate was elected in North west Cambridgeshire.

Under William Hague’s leadership in 1998, the selection of parliamentary candidates was extended beyond the local association executive to embrace all local party members. His proposal that women should make up at least a quarter of the final shortlist was, however, not adopted, and the largely autonomous local associations continued to resist periodic Central Office invitations, renewed in 2001, to draw up more socially representative shortlists. Central Office had to be content with an arrangement first adopted by the Labour party, and called ‘constituency profiling’, where it would recommend the selection of women in seats where it was thought that they might have a greater chance of winning than would men. At one time it was also practically impossible for the central party to force a local association to dispense with the services of a candidate whose actions were deemed damaging to the party’s reputation, though this became a live possibility following Hague’s Fresh Future reforms of 1998 and the introduction of an Ethics Committee. Shortly before the 2005 General Election Howard Flight MP was deselected as candidate for making controversial remarks about Conservative taxation policy.

The Labour party has always adopted a more progressive approach to candidate selection, and David Cameron believes that this has made a significant contribution to the party’s electoral success since 1997. The principle of one member, one vote was eventually extended to the selection of all parliamentary candidates in 1994. Party rules decree that there must be at least one woman on every final shortlist. In 1994-95 the central party imposed all-women party shortlists in 38 winnable seats to overcome the resistance of constituency parties in these seats to selecting women, though the arrangement sparked off massive resentment and provoked a battle in the courts.

The 2002 Sexual Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act clarified the legal position on such exercises in positive discrimination; while they have not been declared...
Teresa May (left) is one of the four women members of David Cameron’s first Shadow Cabinet.

unlawful, the outcome has been a significant reduction in the number of all-women shortlists. The party's rules now specify that at least half of a region’s seats where a sitting Labour MP has announced his or her intention to retire must be filled by women. Where all-women shortlists continue to be imposed, they remain fraught with difficulty - at the 2005 General Election lost one of its safest seats in Blaenau Gwent when a popular former party member ran as an Independent against the candidate selected from such a list. Yet the introduction of all-women shortlists has manifestly broken down traditional prejudices that prevented women from being selected, or even from putting themselves forward for selection. In Labour’s landslide victory in 1997, a record number of 102 women were elected.

BATTLE COMMENCES

Despite the limited choice on offer, in December 2005 David Cameron appointed four of the seventeen female Conservative MPs to his first Shadow Cabinet - Theresa May, Caroline Spelman, Cheryl Gillan and Theresa Villiers (who was first elected to the Commons in May 2005). Four days later, in a speech in Leeds, Cameron served notice that he was ready for a battle with party traditionalists. He vowed to ‘change the face of the Conservative party by changing the faces of the Conservative party’, insisting that ‘we need people from diverse backgrounds to inform everything we do’ and that ‘the conversation we have in the party must reflect the conversation in the country’. He described the sound of modern Britain as ‘a complex harmony, not a male-voice choir’. Winnable target seats or those with a retiring Conservative MP, would now have to select parliamentary candidates from a centrally vetted ‘priority list’ or ‘A-list’, ‘representative of Britain today’, of whom at least half would be women, with a ‘significant proportion’ from ethnic minority backgrounds (at present there are only two ethnic minority Conservative MPs). An immediate freeze on selections would enable a newly established party board ‘Committee on Candidates’, to compile the priority list. Men and women of all ages and backgrounds could apply for inclusion on the list, which would be topped up as candidates are selected, new target seats are identified, and new people apply. Local Conservative Associations in these seats could select a candidate not on the A-list only in ‘exceptional circumstances’.

Spokesmen for the party leader insisted that the new arrangements would not undermine the jealously guarded autonomy of local parties since they would remain free to select any candidate from the shortlist. Nevertheless, the change represents a centralisation of power, as well as a shift away from the party’s strategy in the previous parliament of encouraging the selection of candidates with strong local credentials.

Prior to the 2005 General Election, the candidate list consisted of about one thousand Conservatives, most of them men. Candidates were then instructed to reapply, with the result that the list of names was reduced to about 550.

Cameron’s central aim is to end the dominance of Oxbridge-educated lawyers based in south-east England, and to provide opportunities for people from a diversity of backgrounds; there would also be less emphasis on speech-making, and more on individuals’ ability to interact with voters. Short-listed candidates will be interrogated before party members in a television-style interview, with questions designed to test their commitment to public service and their ‘empathetic skills’; prior to the selection meeting, there would be monitoring of their meetings with residents in the streets of the constituency. In some cases, selection meetings might be open to any local resident, Conservative party member or otherwise, who has registered to attend. This in turn would enable the party to choose candidates who appeal to the wider
electorate rather than to the more narrowly focused association members. Cameron urged every woman, and everyone from a black or minority background, who shared his ‘passion to change Britain for the better’ to apply for inclusion on the new list.

In some respects the arrival of the A-list might be seen simply as the latest expression of the party’s formidable tradition of adapting to the times. In 1918, for example, the year in which women over 30 were first granted the vote, Bonar Law, clearly acting out of electoral self-interest, agreed immediately that a third of all the positions in the party’s hierarchy should be reserved for female members. Female votes have always been critical to the party’s success, and it is therefore notable that the 2005 General Election was the first in which fewer women than men voted for the Conservative party.

Other Conservative leaders, such as Disraeli, Baldwin and Thatcher, have also stressed the importance of broadening the party’s base. As long ago as 1949, David Maxwell Fyfe, future home secretary, reported that those of modest means should not be prevented from becoming Conservative candidates, and demanded an end to nepotism and the effective sale of safe seats to the wealthy.

At present, of the 197 Conservative MPs, no fewer than 178 are white men. Hence Cameron is clearly convinced that a failure to act decisively will ensure that the Conservatives develop into an effective political force, capable of winning the next election, rather than simply a club for the impotently furious. It is no accident that Cameron unleashed his proposals so shortly after assuming the party leadership; they represent an early signal to voters that the Conservatives are once again a national movement rather than an angry, pessimistic, introspective and even ‘nasty’ tribe, obsessed with the narrow issues of taxation, immigration and Europe.

Bernard Jenkin, deputy chairman of the party and in charge of candidate selection, sent a letter to all candidates and local constituency association chairmen outlining the new arrangements. Critics, however, identified the arch-modernisers Francis Maude (party chairman) and Theresa May (shadow Commons leader) as the real architects of the plans. Simon Heffer, Daily Telegraph columnist and no fan of Cameron, contended that the party had become obsessed with image, and in the process ‘ignoring the fact that most voters would like an effective Conservative party rather than one aping a reality TV show’. He, like many, questioned the intellectual rationale behind Cameron’s preoccupation with making the party in parliament much more socially and ethnically representative, since there was no guarantee that such a strategy would produce the best complements of MPs. Moreover, the criteria chosen for compiling the A-list could be seen as arbitrary. Why, for example, should the party not insist on having the same proportion as are found in society in general of probation officers, or mortuary attendants, or ex-prisoners, or Zorastrians, or philatelists, or even sex offenders? This objection clearly struck a chord. By May 2006, Francis Maude was seeking to defuse the inevitable row over the A-list by vowing not to impose ‘mincing metrosexuals’ on ‘gritty northern’ seats.

THE A-LIST HITS PROBLEMS FROM THE START

In early May around a hundred applicants received confirmation that they had been included in the magic A-list. For some unaccountable reason, the party hierarchy, initially committed to ‘openness and transparency’, attempted to keep secret the identities of the chosen few, but the list was swiftly leaked to a Conservative blog, resulting in much predictable discontent. The list included Wilfred Emmanuel Jones, Britain’s only black farmer, and Louise Bagshaw, the author and poet. The A-list effectively
disbarred many experienced Conservative candidates from seeking target seats (it contained only two barristers and two solicitors), and was heavily criticised for its alleged lack of quality. While over two-thirds of those on the list had stood for the party in previous elections, often in hopeless seats. at least two, Liz Truss and Pamela Singleton, had recorded a fall in the Conservatives’ share of the vote in the target seats of Calder Valley and Pudsey in the 2005 election. The conservativehome.com website claimed that as many as 47 on the list had produced worse than average performances at the last election.

At the end of May, a report published by the Cornerstone Group of socially conservative MPs, many of whom had supported Cameron’s leadership campaign, dismissed the A-list as the ‘bizarre theory of people who spend too much time with the pseuds and poseurs of London’s chi-chi set, and not enough time in normal Britain’, urging the party instead to have faith in hard-working local candidates. The backlash intensified when it was revealed that former Coronation Street actor, Adam Rickitt, now an underwear model, was on the A-list and had applied for the safe seat of Folkestone and Hythe being vacated at the next election by Michael Howard. Rickitt had never previously stood for election at any level, and had no links with Folkestone; this was quickly recognised by local Association members, who eliminated Rickitt from consideration at the very first selection stage.

The A-list became operational in early May. 55% of the individuals on the list were women, and more than 10% were ethnic minority representatives. Under Cameron’s plans, local associations in the party’s first tranche of 35 most winnable seats must have selected their candidates from the A-list by the end of July.

Yet many local associations, such as Finchley and Golders Green (Labour majority of 741), reported that they had received so few applicants from the list that they were in no position to hold their selection contests as planned. ‘Elite’ candidates appeared to be shunning the more risky seats and were applying only to safe constituencies. Telford (Labour majority of 5,406) had only one A-list applicant, as did Liberal Democrat-held Oxford West and Abingdon.

Many critics blamed Franis Maude for the shambles - ‘the biggest mistake was trying to get A-list candidates to go for B-list seats’. Bernard Jenkin was obliged to concede that mistakes had been made and that there would be changes in place before the next round of selection contests in the autumn. Candidates on the A-list would probably be ordered to apply for more difficult seats. And, in an admission that the first 35 seats had been too widely drawn, the target seats for A-list candidates would in the future include only those where the party had a reasonable chance of victory. Constituency associations dissatisfied with the field of applicants could postpone selection until later in the year. In turn Maude offered an olive branch by explaining that if an association wanted to interview an outstanding local candidate who was not on the A-list then ‘they can ask us and we’ll generally be accommodating to that’.

MORE AND MORE PROBLEMS

The A-list failed its first test on 3rd June when party members in Bromley and Chislehurst, selecting a by-election candidate to replace the late Eric Forth MP, rejected two A-list candidates (a woman and an Asian) on the final shortlist of three in favour of the local barrister Bob Neill, leader of the Conservative group on the London Assembly. While it had been decided not to foist an A-list candidate on the association, prior to Neill’s selection, David Cameron had...
defended the A-list in a personal appeal to the thousand association members. Jenkin disclosed that the party had been obliged to hold a special panel to include Neill on its list of candidates. Cameron subsequently insisted that the Bromley contest was not in fact a test of the new rules as it was conducted under existing rules for selecting by-election candidates.

Indeed, in August, he agreed that local residents, even those without political experience, could be chosen to contest by-elections. Neill went on to win the by-election, though the Conservative majority was cut from 13,000 to 600 in a swing to the Liberal Democrats of 14%. Another key test for the A-list came in Folkestone and Hythe just over a week later, where party members made their choice of candidate to succeed Michael Howard from a final shortlist of three, all from the A-list. Up to this point, the party had selected 32 candidates, of whom only ten were women, and of whom only two emerged from the A-list. The final selection of Damian Collins in preference to the two female candidates was widely interpreted as a further blow to Cameron, whom it was believed had a secret target of twenty women in the first 35 seats to select. Within days, however, female candidates (dubbed ‘Dave’s dolls’) had been adopted for the highly winnable seats of West Worcestershire, Staffordshire Moorlands and Broxtowe, bringing to a third the proportion of women selected to contest winnable seats.

On 5th August Cameron threatened to remove ‘celebrity’ candidates from the A-list if they failed to apply for a suitably large number of constituencies. He ordered letters to be sent to ‘under-performers’ by Bernard Jenkin after several lower-profile list members complained that, while they were complying with the process, many better known members, such as Zak Goldsmith, were waiting for the safest seats to appear. The letter explained to the recalcitrants that ‘being a priority candidate is a privilege that carries obligations’, and thus involved applying ‘for as many seats as possible’.

It was also revealed that the A-list had recently been watered down, as it had been doubled to around 200 names, with the proportion of women rising to about 60%. The dearth of suitably high-profile candidates had also resulted in the extension of the deadline for entries to be the party’s candidate for London mayor. Some party officials were willing to accept that the A-list had largely been a failure, with only 13 of the 47 seats allocated by the start of August going to women. Indeed, the Conservatives had selected proportionally fewer women under the A-list system (31%) than under the old system (32%). Only twelve local parties had made selections from the list, with ten more bypassing it, nine of which had selected men.

Cameron expressed concern that nearly half the local associations had effectively ignored the A-list, declared that he would ‘like us to do better’ and pledged to ‘look carefully to see how future selections go’. Some A-list candidates even complained that their inclusion had in practice proved to be a hindrance, given the reluctance of many local associations to comply with Cameron’s arrangements.

Research by The Times, published on 12th June, also cast doubt on whether the A-list was truly representative. It found that only six of those on the list had pursued careers in the public services, with the majority instead choosing one of the traditional career paths for aspiring Conservative MPs, with jobs in business, the legal profession or Tory party politics. This suggested that, while the next generation of MPs will include more women and members of ethnic minorities, their work experience will not differ greatly from that of the current crop of
MPs. Further analysis of the candidates revealed that at least a third had given Cameron public support during his leadership campaign. Subsequent research, appearing on the conservativehome.com website at the start of August and compiled from a survey of candidates, suggested that the average cost for Conservative candidates to reach Westminster was as high as £41,550, a sum that included loss of earnings, as well as completing the party’s approved procedures for candidates, finding and securing a nomination, and finally triumphing at the polls. The site warned that to ensure genuine ‘candidate diversity’, Cameron needed to find ways of helping those on low incomes to become candidates.

**CONCLUSION - A RE-THINK BY CAMERON - BUT IN WHICH DIRECTION?**

Crunch time is approaching for Cameron. He has already been forced into a number of U-turns, all of which underline the difficulty of cajoling reluctant local associations to toe his unwelcome modernising line.

At present, these associations hold the whip hand and Conservative Central Office simply has no power to parachute its favoured candidates into safe seats. By the end of August it was increasingly clear that a frustrated Cameron was set to introduce new measures to increase the number of female and ethnic minority candidates selected for these seats. He has insisted that the targeted local associations must include at least one woman on the final shortlist.

He is also encouraging local parties to adopt more US-style primaries, where nominations are thrown open to a far wider section of the electorate than the party’s committed activists. Such primaries will become mandatory wherever the association has fewer than 300 members. In such cases, therefore, grassroots party members will be denied the final say in the selection of the candidate unless they have adopted an all-women shortlist. In larger associations party members will select a shortlist of four, of whom at least two must be women. Cameron promises that he will review whether still further action is needed later in the year.

Cameron demands that the party must go ‘further and faster’ to fulfil his pledge to make its MPs more representative of the nation. It seems unlikely that he will achieve his principal A-list objective of securing a substantial increase in the number of female MPs unless and until he takes the unpopular, though decisive step of imposing all-women shortlists, an approach he rejected on 21st August as ‘a step too far’ since it ‘denied the ultimate choice to the constituency’. In the absence of any such step, it is difficult to see how there can be a significant increase in the number of Conservative women elected to parliament, since pleading with local associations has generally failed to deliver the goods.

If all-women shortlists were to be imposed on local associations, the reaction would be far more ferocious than that experienced by Labour in the 1990s. Many Conservatives are utterly opposed to all-women shortlists as a matter of principle, and their numbers include many women such as Ann Widdecombe, who has described them as patronising, undemocratic and ‘an insult to women’. Yet, despite the inevitable backlash, this issue may turn out to be the acid test of Cameron’s determination - and ability - to modernise the party.
First Past the Post

How and Why Cameron Won the Leadership

David Cameron’s performance at the 2005 Conservative Party Conference launched his remarkable run to the Party leadership. But Cameron was far from being the sole architect of his victory.

CAMERON THE OUTSIDER

Few of the friends that contemplated David Cameron’s leadership bid expected anything other than a victory for David Davis. Their hearts wanted ‘Dave’ to win but their heads told them that 2005 was really about positioning for the next battle in four or five years’ time. Indeed, there were occasions when some of Cameron’s friends were tempted to throw in the towel.

Cheerleaders at The Times lost heart in the middle of September and used a leader column to suggest that it might soon be wise to team up with a bigger beast. The bigger beast came in the shape of Ken Clarke, who made overtures to Cameron that were rebuffed. Simultaneously some of Cameron’s closest lieutenants were complaining about their candidate’s unwillingness to take risks. Some bookmakers were offering odds of 25 to 1 against Cameron winning the leadership.

Cameron’s leadership hopes were transformed just days later. Two compelling performances, first at his campaign launch and then the now famous Blackpool conference speech, transformed his public standing. He was no longer the little boat at the mercy of powerful currents and the swell of larger craft; he was the supertanker candidate on course for certain victory.

But Cameron was far from being the sole architect of his victory. Michael Howard and David Davis also played very considerable roles.

HOWARD PRE-EMPTS A PUTSCH AND EMBARKS ON A LONG FAREWELL

A few days before the General Election on 5th May Michael Howard learnt that supporters of David Davis were beginning to collect the 25 signatures of MPs necessary to trigger a Commons vote of no confidence. Had Howard not resigned by the weekend after polling day, the Sunday newspapers would have been dominated by talk of an impending challenge to his leadership.

On 6th May Howard did indeed announce his resignation, but it was to be a very long goodbye. He engineered an election process that fatally damaged Davis’ hopes.

Allies of Howard insist that his timetable reflected a straightforward wish to avoid the party rushing to the wrong judgment, as appeared to happen after 1997 and 2001. The Davis camp believed that this was a deliberate ploy to destroy their candidate’s chances. At the time Davis was seen as the darling of the grassroots and Howard’s proposed exercise in disenfranchisement appeared to be an anti-Davis manoeuvre.

An immediate election would have given Davis almost certain victory because Cameron would not then have had the opportunity to address the party conference, while Davis would have hit the ground running from the outset.

Instead Howard gave Cameron, Osborne and Fox big promotions. The Davis camp took to calling them ‘Howard’s Children’. The longest leadership election in history gave the Davis team the opportunity to make the mistakes expected by many of his enemies. The contest came to resemble an American-style primary where the campaign message, discipline and team-building skills of candidates are tested over many months. A gutsy display by Davis in the final weeks of the campaign was too little and too late to compensate for earlier complacency and strategic misjudgments.

This was Davis’ third leadership race. He had finished fourth in 2001 and had pulled out of the race to succeed Duncan Smith. That 2003 departure had led to the unopposed coronation of Michael Howard and there were early hopes in the Davis camp that their man could also ascend to the Tory throne by unanimous acclamation.

DAVIS HAD MADE TOO MANY ENEMIES; DIVISIONS ON THE RIGHT

Few beyond the tight group surrounding Davis believed in this coronation scenario. Davis had acquired many enemies over the years. His past rough treatment of the press would hurt him badly at the Blackpool conference. Jeremy Paxman accurately noted that the Whips’ Office had once selected him as their ‘shit of the year’. Indeed allies of each of the party’s previous three leaders held Davis in contempt. They were slow to organise against him.
at first, being reluctant to get on the wrong side of the likely next leader, but they pounced after olive branches had been rejected. Some of the party’s most prominent right-wing MPs became Davis’ most vociferous opponents. The fracturing of the Conservative Right explains why this is the first time since Heath beat Maudling, in 1965, that its perceived favoured candidate has lost the leadership election.

Some of the divisions on the right reflect the new divisions in politics. Where the right once united against communism, trade unions and big government it is now divided on drugs, family life and homeland security.

Much of the socially conservative right look to Duncan Smith’s vision of social justice and have become separated from those right-wingers who cannot see beyond the narrow vision of core vote or ‘dog whistle’ issues.

The compassionate right found common cause with Cameron’s insistence that a broader agenda was vital for electoral success. Some of the sourest divisions are, however, deeply personal. Davis brought those divisions into the open. Allies of Hague felt that he never received Davis’ backing when it mattered most. Some of the Eurosceptic right had never forgiven Davis for his role in securing the passage of the Maastricht Treaty. IDS loyalists remembered the role that Davis’ lieutenants played in the downfall of their man. Those resentments might have been forgiven if Davis had not turned his back on the right’s initial peace offerings.

Davis hoped to be the big tent candidate - elected by a broad cross-section of the parliamentary party in order to become an effective leader of it. He did not want to be seen as a factional candidate of the right and actively wooed MPs such as Damian Green, John Maples, Ian Taylor and his biggest of all converts, David Willetts. Ironically, most of their friends on the left never followed them.

FOX RAIDS THE EXPOSED RIGHT FLANK

With Davis’ right flank fully exposed Liam Fox saw his opportunity and seized it with ruthless determination. The Shadow Foreign Secretary recruited key right-wingers like John Hayes to his team. Hayes had been a leading organiser of IDS’ successful 2001 campaign and was furious at the way Davis had marginalised the right.

The Fox campaign bombed Davis’ right flank. A commitment to leave the EPP was thrown as red meat to the eurosceptics. Opposition to abortion and support for marriage delighted the social conservatives. An uncompromising position on Iraq won over a few national security hawks. The ‘broken society’ message appealed to compassionate conservatives. Fox outgunned Clarke in the first round of voting and the defeated Clarke supporters flocked to Cameron, regarding Davis’ attempt to appeal to them as the most europhile of the remaining candidates more with derision than contempt.

Fox’s supporters believed that their candidate could have given Cameron a tougher fight in the final round. That was also the clear view of the Cameron camp. The Cameroons saw Davis as a wounded animal by the end of the parliamentary voting.

Fox, in contrast, had momentum behind him. Fox supporters were convinced that tactical voting by Cameron supporters kept their candidate out of the run-off. Cameron supporters denied any tactical voting but all camps agreed that Cameron secured five or six fewer votes than expected. There is always a folklore attached to the recollections of Tory leadership elections and tactical voting by Cameron-supporting MPs for Davis has joined the mist of fact and fiction.

In the absence of this tactical voting there might never have been a vote of grassroots members. Some of Davis’ supporters wanted a personal and collective exit strategy if Cameron hit the 100 votes mark in the final round of
parliamentary voting. Some of his supporters remembered his 2003 submission to Michael Howard and it seemed like déjà vu.

One MP, Christopher Chope, demanded without success that Davis sign a ‘I will fight on’ declaration as his price for voting for him. Rumours of a Davis capitulation gathered force after Andrew Mitchell and Damian Green, when challenged by Chope and Eric Forth, had both failed to squash speculation. Fox could hardly believe his luck. His campaign team told MPs that Fox was the only candidate capable of ensuring that grassroots members would have a chance to vote, a principle many had successfully battled to defend. A lack of acumen by Davis’ team had let him down again.

CLARKE FLATTERS TO DECEIVE

But Davis did narrowly prevail over Fox and so took the contest to the country. His opponent – Cameron - was by then the hot favourite. While Davis had pipped Fox in the centre-right primary, Cameron had overwhelmed Clarke for the hearts and minds of the party’s pragmatists and soft left. It had not looked like that a month earlier. Through the middle of September Clarke had eclipsed Cameron. Cameron had taken a poorly timed holiday just as the Tory jungle’s biggest surviving beast burst on to the stage. The Mail showered the former Chancellor with favourable coverage and The Telegraph gave him Hello-style treatment. Rachel Sylvester and Alice Thomson gushed all over Clarke in an interview headlined ‘Women love him, so do the young - and he scares the pants off Labour’. It was not the last time that the right-wing press proved to be peripheral players in this contest. The Mail’s campaign to elect Clarke failed again. There was no consistent line at The Sun. The Telegraph followed opinion within the Conservative Party rather than leading it.

The Clarke bandwagon started slowing, however, at the moment David Willetts made his surprise endorsement of Davis. Clarke had actively courted Willetts’ support and his ‘defection’ – as Clarke supporters saw it – was a body blow. More days passed and Clarke failed to pick up new parliamentary endorsements. He had started his campaign very late and many MPs who had supported his 1997 and 2001 bids had already journeyed to other candidates - Taylor for Davis, Luff for Cameron, Heald for Fox. None returned home.

Few of the new MPs knew Clarke or shared his view of the world. These were candidates whose political schooling occurred during the lean years when the party had moved decisively in a eurosceptic direction, a direction vindicated by events. New MPs were not inclined to back a man who had weighed against those changes and had the whiff of the ancien regime.

Clarke did not even try particularly hard to woo them. He was used to the fawning attention of the metropolitan media. He only had to get out of bed and Fleet Street’s finest would be there to cover the occasion. He was not ready to invest his precious time in convincing sceptics of his self-evident merits.

CAMERON ANOINTED BY THE MEDIA AND LOVED BY PARTY MEMBERS

Perhaps sensing Clarke’s problems Cameron stirred to life a week before the party conference. He launched a high-stakes attack on his opponents’ weaknesses. Davis’ approach was ‘political suicide’. Clarke’s europhilia amounted to ‘national suicide’. John Bercow, then cohabiting with Ann Widdecombe in the Clarke camp, retaliated with a class war attack on Cameron but it bounced off. Bercow, like Alan Duncan, who had told a newspaper that Cameron ‘wasn’t ready to play with the big boys’, later inelegantly clambered onto the increasingly rolling Cameron bandwagon.

It was at that stage that George Osborne, Cameron’s campaign manager, chose to act decisively. The faltering
campaign gambled £10,000 on a campaign launch for the Thursday before the party conference.

This turned out to be a glittering performance. For a moment the Cameroons’ hearts sank when they learnt that Davis had opted to launch on the same day. But, with a adroitness beyond the Davis team’s imagination, they realised that this juxtaposition was potentially to their man’s advantage and the most public of opportunities to represent him as Davis’ likeliest challenger.

Cameron spoke without notes and with an authority that belied his years. He reprised the ‘And Theory’ Of Conservatism. The ‘And Theory’ suggested that it was unnecessary to jettison traditional beliefs in order to offer a broader electoral appeal. It was possible to offer both tax relief and greater investment in public services. It was possible to be both eurosceptic and to care for the hungry of Africa.

In sharp contrast Davis flopped at his campaign launch. The tired staging matched the tired website. The unflattering comparison with Cameron’s launch was a curtain-raiser to the drama that would unfold in Blackpool.

Few party members probably remember very much of what Cameron actually said in his Blackpool speech. What they do remember is that they liked him from that moment on. They were not convinced by powerful arguments; rather, they fell in love. Cameron is the kind of man that mature Tory ladies have always hoped that their daughter might bring home. By contrast, the same ladies saw the Davis team as the kind of bunch with whom they would not want their sons to fall in.

Boris Johnson and Ann Widdecombe are among the most sought-after speakers on the constituency associations’ rubber chicken circuit. Party members turn out for celebrity and entertainment. It has been said that Cameron has the ‘X-factor’ and that he was the Stardust candidate. This idea came to life on television when a black man spontaneously hugged him in the street and called for others to embrace him too. The Conservative party knew that it had a star in the making. Cameron appealed to people who had never warmed to the Conservatives before. He was able to talk about his love for his disabled son without overdoing it. His optimistic disposition was almost Reaganesque. His smile was a welcome change from the usual Tory frown.

If Cameron gave a captivating speech at conference, the Davis address was a disaster, and universally described as lack-lustre. He was guilty of basic errors. No single speechwriter had been found who could become ‘his voice’, and the speech was written by a committee of advisers. Any previous leader would confirm the need for intensive preparation and rehearsal of such set-piece events, yet Davis failed to rehearse it until the day before.

There was a moment of real pathos when David Davis had finished his speech flatly and had to gesture to his audience to rise to its feet.

THE MEDIA TURN ON DAVIS

Unfortunately for Davis the media reported a disappointing speech as a disastrous speech. ITN’s Political Editor, Tom Bradby, led the charge. Party members watching the news from the comfort of their sofas learnt that Davis had bombed badly. BBC’s Nick Robinson was kinder in his first reports for News 24 but was soon chanting the ‘this has been a disaster for Davis’ mantra.

The press hunt in packs and Davis, who had few friends in the lobby, became their unfortunate quarry. Some lobby journalists wanted the race to be interesting and attacks on the front-runner served their purpose remarkably well. Others had been treated badly by the Davis team and – like the former leadership regime loyalists in parliament – took their opportunity for revenge.

A further factor is the politics of the lobby. Most of the journalists who write for right-of-centre newspapers dare not Conservative voters. Fewer still are social or cultural conservatives, and several regard the Tory
faithful as xenophobic and racist. The lobby is liberal and metropolitan. David Cameron moves in the same social circles and, as a member of the in-crowd and a good mixer, they like what they see in him.

Within 24 hours of Davis’ speech the bookmakers had overturned the odds and installed Cameron as hot favourite. That status was confirmed by a YouGov poll two days later. Support for Cameron had doubled, while that for Davis had halved.

Peter Kellner, Chairman of YouGov, said that he had ‘never seen such a big change in such a short time in 35 years of reporting and conducting opinion polls’. But YouGov’s polling, for the second Tory election in a row, proved highly accurate.

MPs got the message from the polls. An election that might otherwise have been determined behind closed doors, with the usual promises of jobs and arm-twisting, was being decided by the opinions of grassroots members. Indeed, Michael Howard, in his botched attempt to deny party members the vote in the hope and expectation that MPs would be less enamoured of Davis than ordinary members need not have worried.

In the end it was a tidal wave of grassroots support that led many MPs to abandon their pledges to Davis and to embrace Cameron. Howard had seen one of his ‘Children’

anointed, if more by accident than design.

DAVIS CONDUCTS A DIGNIFIED CAMPAIGN DESPITE BEING DESTINED TO LOSE

A lesser man would have collapsed under these circumstances but there is an obstinate courage about Davis. He was not engulfed by the trauma of Blackpool or by the outcome of the rounds of MPs’ voting. Some MPs who had run his campaign up until that time were sidelined and outside professionals were drafted in.

Andrew Mitchell MP, his campaign manager, knew that urgent action was needed to slow the Cameron juggernaut. He hired ex-Times journalist Nick Wood and former TV journalist Nick Longworth, both of Media Intelligence Partners, to oversee the media operation, and David Canzini, a hard-bitten ex-Central Office election battler, took over the grassroots campaign. There was suddenly new life in the campaign. Hard-edged policies on tax, Europe, education and social justice were now outlined. Had they come earlier, might have protected him from the competition that had already overwhelmed him.

Throughout the campaign and the hustings a dignified Davis treated his opponent with respect. Most commentators believe that he conducted the contest with a statesmanlike eye to the long-term health of the Conservative Party. In this he confounded those who could only see him as an ambitious and self-engrossed schemer.

The Cameron camp had expected Davis to throw the kitchen sink at their candidate during the critical Question Time debate. He was certainly supplied with potentially deadly ammunition. As part of a detailed half-day rehearsal at the Lewis Media Centre at Millbank tower, once Labour’s temple of spin, experts fine-tuned killer lines that could have spotlighted Cameron’s policy U-turns, his extraordinary inexperience and his evasions about past drug use. Amanda Platell, Hague’s former media adviser, made a guest appearance at the rehearsal, giving Davis advice on how to project his message under fire.

But Davis declined to use the rehearsed lines that might only have poisoned the party for years to come. Davis still won the Question Time debate. He demonstrated a superior grasp of policy and he crystallised the choice before party activists. After three Blair governments people were tired of the politics of spin. ‘Frankly,’ he said, ‘this is the worst moment for the Conservative Party to imitate Tony Blair.’

But he failed to break the love affair between the party and Cameron.
IS CAMERON THE ANSWER FOR THE CONSERVATIVES?

As expected Cameron was elected Leader of the Conservative Party, winning the support of 134,446 party members compared with the 64,398 votes cast for Davis - a very large majority. The party chose a leader who himself compared his appeal and mission to that of Tony Blair. Tony Blair, however, had been an MP for eleven years before he became leader; Cameron was first elected only in 2001 and has had only one recent and short spell on the Opposition front bench as shadow spokesman for Education.

Nonetheless, he arrived as leader with an extraordinary opportunity, enjoying the goodwill of the press at a time when Labour smelt of decay. He has the confidence of the majority of parliamentary party and the grassroots membership. His fluent charm and political nous have earned goodwill from the left and right leaving him able to lead a broad shadow cabinet. It includes a majority of supporters, as well as his defeated opponent, David Davis, and the former party leader (who came out in support of Cameron during the campaign), William Hague.

Within days of being elected leader, opinion polls showed that the Conservatives had overtaken Labour for the first time in years. Within a month, the party had recruited nearly 20,000 new members. A bravura performance at his first Prime Minister’s Question Time saw Cameron telling Blair that ‘you were the future – once’. He claims that he has no truck with ‘Punch and Judy politics’ and promised to provide Conservative support for Blair’s Education legislation that is opposed by dozens of Labour backbenchers.

He quickly set up a variety of policy commissions with a view to shaping the direction and detail of most areas of party policy over the next three years. And by January 2006 Cameron had already distanced himself from the Thatcherite legacy, and had reversed party policy on the NHS, come out against school selection and warned industry that it should be more socially and environmentally responsible.

It is clear that Cameron has the opportunity, skills and charisma to reshape Conservatism, and that he intends to be bold. Critical to his longer-term success will be the way he manages the tensions within the Conservative coalition. His leadership bid attracted support from the liberal ‘Notting Hillbillies’ as well as the socially conservative Cornerstone Group, the ‘92 Group and the No Turning Back Group.

Already he has attracted criticism for abandoning traditional Conservative principles from Lord Tebbit and Simon Heffer of the Telegraph. An unhappy right could eventually prove to be Cameron’s greatest headache. Yet his popularity may keep the right quiet as Blair’s popularity once kept Labour’s left compliant.

The Conservative party suddenly looks much more impressive than the government it shadows. The danger comes if the political climate turns hostile, and the men around Cameron stop looking like a government-in-waiting and more like would-be leaders ready to catch the crown if it slips from the young king’s head.
Where Now for Constitutional Reform?

Tony Blair’s programme of constitutional reform is likely to be seen as one of his government’s greatest legacies. But where next for Britain’s constitution when Blair moves on?

BLAIR’S INDIFFERENCE TO CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Tony Blair is widely expected to stand down as prime minister before the end of 2007, and there are constant press reports of the importance that he attaches to the legacy that he leaves. It is almost certain that the programme of constitutional reform will be seen as his government’s greatest legacy, and this is deeply ironic given Blair’s lack of interest in the subject. As Labour leader he has offered only one major speech on constitutional reform, despite the wave of legislation that was passed in Labour’s first term.

For Blair, there are more pressing issues, such as national security, public service reform and the ‘respect’ agenda. Yet the constitutional reforms already in place, far from representing a final settlement, have raised new questions and demands, which in turn require analysis and response.

Traditionally the Labour party has been committed to strong and effective central government as a means of delivering greater equality and social justice. Most of the party’s leaders and prominent figures have been suspicious of, and even hostile towards devolution and several other constitutional reforms in the belief that they might result in fragmented government, differences in local practice and greater inequality.

It can be argued with some conviction that Blair also fits into this category. His government’s reforms had no unifying theme or logic; instead, they were introduced on a piecemeal basis, often in response to the demands made by special interests, or as a largely token gesture to the need for ‘modernisation’.

Blair’s ambivalence was evident from the outset. It was seen in his botched attempt to prevent Ken Livingstone becoming the first elected mayor of London and Rhodri Morgan the first minister in Wales. The reforms have also set in train processes that have surprised, constrained and at times irritated Blair, and in particular the rebelliousness of the House of Lords and a series of judicial rulings under the Human Rights Act.

DEVOLUTION DEVELOPMENTS

The process of Welsh devolution is far from complete. Unlike the Scottish parliament, the Welsh assembly was provided with no power to introduce primary legislation, an arrangement that is anomalous and clearly not working. In 2002 Rhodri Morgan established an all-party commission, chaired by Ivor Richard, to examine the powers of the assembly.

The commission reported in March 2004 and recommended that the assembly should be granted primary legislative powers, and that the number of seats should be increased from 60 to 80, with all members elected by STV. The Welsh Labour party, which to this day remains divided over devolution, represents the principal obstacle to reform.

The government has responded by setting out a timetable to meet the Richard commission’s proposals in three stages. From this year, there will be more framework legislation to grant the assembly more powers. This will be followed by still wider legislative power being granted in defined areas by Order in Council. Finally, there will be a transfer of primary legislative powers over all devolved areas, but only following a referendum.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Scotland has shown little solidarity with Wales. It is of course possible that Scotland will in due course come to accept the logic of the Welsh assembly being granted powers equivalent to those of its own parliament. More likely, however, is the prospect that Scotland will demand to remain at least one step ahead.

This might explain the announcement by the first minister, Jack McConnell, in June 2005, of a review of the powers of the Scottish parliament. The areas on McConnell’s agenda – nuclear power, drugs, firearms, casinos, abortion, broadcasting, immigration – appear to have been selected almost arbitrarily.

The most critical longer-term question is the funding of Scottish devolution. Scottish Conservatives want a commission to examine the case for fiscal autonomy, while the Liberal Democrats are reviewing a range of additional powers, including the capacity to raise a variety of taxes.
Labour remains wedded to the present Barnett formula, though this position is probably unsustainable in the long run. The parliament’s dependence upon a block grant determined by the Treasury is a source of growing controversy, which will intensify still further if public spending is squeezed. It is difficult therefore to see how a parliament with considerable legislative autonomy can ultimately be denied an equivalent fiscal autonomy.

There is also ‘the English question’. Given the creation of devolved assemblies throughout the remainder of the UK, there is some logic in the claim that English laws should be settled by English votes. This would, however, create an English parliament at Westminster, and thus the potential for an elected British government unable to legislate for England. This in turn would create a constitutional problem far greater than the present West Lothian question, where Scottish MPs may vote on laws affecting the English, but not vice versa wherever the policy area is one that is devolved to the Scottish parliament.

There is little evidence that English citizens are craving for the creation of an English parliament, despite periodic Conservative demands for one to be established. Instead the approach adopted by the government has been support for regional assemblies to be set up in England. It therefore received a nasty shock when the proposed flagship assembly in the north-east was decisively rejected in a referendum in November 2004. Voters feared more bureaucracy and higher council taxes, while the limited substantive powers envisaged for the assembly ensured that it was dismissed as a mere talking shop.

It is also worth noting that all the campaigning was left in the hands of John Prescott, and it is difficult to recall any involvement by Blair. Regional assemblies are therefore clearly off the agenda for the foreseeable future, but at some future date the question will be raised whether the existing and burgeoning regional development agencies should come under direct democratic control.

The issue is ultimately whether elected regional assemblies are granted real powers and functions. In this context the Greater London Authority might well prove to be a viable model. The GLA is a strategic body, with no service delivery role. But the government has initiated a review of its powers, and more such powers might well be devolved over time. The GLA is certainly proof of the fact that strategic bodies can be more than a talking shop, especially given its record in attracting inward investment, creating infrastructure and promoting London as a global brand.

THE REVIVAL OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS

Reform of the House of Lords stalled very quickly after the initial removal of all but 92 of the hereditary peers in the 1999 House of Lords Act. The challenge remains to complete the reform and to honour Labour’s 2001 manifesto pledge to make the House ‘more representative and democratic’. There is, however, no agreement in either Commons or Lords over the extent to which a reformed Lords should be elected or appointed, and still less consensus over the methods of election and appointment. The Wakeham commission (January 2000) recommended an elected element of up to 35%, while the government’s White Paper (November 2001) suggested 20%.

None of these proposals found favour, and by January 2003 Blair had announced that he was opposed to the introduction of any element of election. The House of Commons held an ostensibly free vote on the issue in February 2003, and promptly rejected all seven of an exhaustive range of options, from fully elected to fully appointed. By July of that year the government had conceded that there was no consensus, and confined its reform agenda to the removal of the final 92 hereditary peers. Its 2005 manifesto referred to the need to clarify the powers of the Lords, but offered practically nothing on the thorny issue of its composition.
It is, however, no accident that the House of Lords is now inflicting regular defeats on the government. With the removal of most of the hereditary peers, the House regards itself as having greater legitimacy, and is less inhibited about defeating the government. Moreover, many Conservative and Liberal Democrat peers are angry that the government has reneged on its promise that the removal of the final 92 hereditary peers would be part of a package of reform and not a stand alone commitment.

Until November 2005 Blair had never lost a Commons vote, but in the Lords since 2001 the government has been defeated in about 30% of all divisions. Indeed, in 2004-05, more than half the divisions resulted in defeat, a trend that has continued in 2005-06 as the bills in question have become increasingly contentious. Labour is now for the first time the largest party in the Lords, but no single party commands a majority.

Increasingly, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and many cross-benchers are forming alliances to defeat the government, and thus to force it to make unwanted concessions in an already congested legislative timetable. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats are openly questioning the Salisbury convention whereby the Lords will not block a government bill that was contained in its manifesto, and are also keen to codify the convention that no one political party should seek a majority in the Lords, a principle enunciated by Labour in its 1997 manifesto.

The Lords is also developing new roles. The Wakeham commission recommended that the Lords should be guardians of the constitution, and in 2001 the House established a new select committee on the constitution. It has taken a particular interest in devolution, viewing it very much in the round, and not afraid of criticising its anomalies and shortcomings.

**RENEWED INTEREST IN ELECTORAL REFORM**

In its 1997 manifesto Labour declared that it was ‘committed to a referendum on the voting system for the House of Commons’, and pledged to set up an independent commission on voting systems ‘to recommend a proportional alternative to the first past the post system’. The resulting Jenkins commission duly recommended a system (‘AV plus’) in 1998 that provided for a limited degree of proportionality through regional ‘top-up’ seats; the report was almost immediately shelved by the government.

Labour’s 2001 manifesto contained a significantly watered down commitment to electoral reform. The party now pledged a review of the experience of the new hybrid voting systems that had been introduced in 1999 for elections to the devolved assemblies and the European parliament. Again, a referendum was pledged for ‘any change for Westminster’, though there was now no commitment to any such change. There is little support in the Cabinet for the holding of a referendum, and the commitment to electoral reform has clearly been shelved – the 2005 manifesto contained much the same phrases as had appeared in 2001.

Nevertheless, there remain forces in politics that might well trigger a renewed interest in electoral reform. The Liberal Democrats now have the greatest number of Commons seats of any third party since 1923, while the number of UK constituencies not represented by a Labour or Conservative MP is not far short of a hundred. Several studies suggest that once minor parties have gained a foothold in an assembly, thus creating a multi-party system, there comes a point where FPTP threatens the dominance of one or even both of the major parties.

Labour was re-elected in 2005 with a much smaller majority of 65, and the lowest ever share of the vote (35%).
for a majority government. The Conservatives are horribly disadvantaged by FPTP – had they equalled Labour’s share of the vote in 2005 they would still have won 110 fewer seats than Labour. Some Conservatives privately concede that the party will never again win an outright majority, and therefore that electoral reform might well be in the party’s interest.

With the fortunes of the Conservatives much revived following the election of David Cameron as party leader in December 2005 and Labour under pressure both in the Commons and in the country for the first time since 1997, there is much talk of a hung parliament after the next election, with the Liberal Democrats holding the balance of power. It is then possible that the Liberal Democrats might exploit their bargaining power to force a referendum on PR. A positive result in any such referendum would produce a dramatic change in British politics, with the Liberal Democrats in all probability holding the balance of power in both Houses of parliament.

THE EFFECTS OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

The Human Rights Act is also changing the face of British politics. In the run-up to the 2005 election Michael Howard said that the Conservatives would establish a commission to review the operation of the Act while, in the aftermath of the London bombings in July 2005, Blair declared that ‘the rules of the game’ had now changed.

But it remains the case that the government would find itself on a still greater collision course than at present with the judiciary if it were ever to contemplate seriously the repeal of its own Act. In practice the judges have so far treated the Act with a fair degree of caution. In the first five years they have exercised their power under Section 3 to reinterpret statutes to ensure compliance with the ECHR in only twelve cases, while they have made seventeen ‘declarations of incompatibility’ under Section 4. In response, the government has taken remedial action on every occasion, by repealing or amending the offending provision.

Over time, however, the impact of the HRA is bound to increase. The rights contained in the ECHR are expressed in very general terms, and are thus capable of endless interpretation. Moreover, the HRA has potent defenders in the parliamentary joint committee on human rights and, from the autumn of 2007, in the new commission for equality and human rights. Hence, over time, the strengthening and further development of most of the rights specified in the ECHR can be expected.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF JUDICIAL REFORM

The measures to reform the judiciary that were suddenly and clumsily unveiled in June 2003 initially provoked great alarm, and led to a battle royal between the government and the judiciary. The latter won several concessions, which were codified in the Constitutional Reform Act of 2005. The office of Lord Chancellor, threatened with abolition, has been preserved, and there is now a statutory duty imposed upon the holder of the office to uphold the independence of the judiciary.

The Lord Chancellor’s traditional role as head of the judiciary is transferred in April 2006 to the Lord Chief Justice, with a concordat dividing functions between the two as part of a much more clearly focused separation of powers. The Lord Chancellor’s power to select new judges will be curtailed by the new judicial appointments commission, while a new supreme court replaces the appellate committee of the Lords as the highest court in the land.

In one sense very little will change. The same judges (the present law lords) will have the same jurisdiction and will hear the same kind of cases, albeit in a different building (the Middlesex Guildhall) from October 2008. Yet the combination of the HRA, devolution and the creation of the new court will trigger a series of further changes.

Over time there is likely to be a significantly different mix
of cases for hearing, with far more cases of constitutional significance in areas such as the right to assisted suicide, privacy, relationships with the European Union and a variety of human rights issues.

This has been the experience of the Canadian supreme court over 25 years, and it is likely that our own supreme court will gradually develop into more of a constitutional court. This in turn will generate greater interest in the identities of the senior judges and in the method by which they were appointed.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFORM BACK ON THE AGENDA WHEN BROWN TAKES OVER?

It is abundantly clear that constitutional reform, on the scale introduced by the present government, unleashes powerful forces creating new tensions and challenges in a complex system of multi-governance. This has proved to be unsettling for Blair who, in some respects at least, failed to identify the ongoing consequences of his own government’s legislation.

A ‘new narrative’ is required that explains the need for continuing reform and which offers a rather better justification than the hackneyed resort to ‘modernisation’.

At a constitutional level, there should be some recognition that too much power was concentrated at the centre of government. Many new checks and balances have been introduced into the system. There has been significant devolution of power in the UK, with more almost certainly in the pipeline. Through the HRA, freedom of information legislation and the Constitutional Reform Act, there is a greater separation of powers, a tighter rule of law, greater clarity and stronger accountability.

Parliament is more effective with a more confident House of Lords (and with far less docile backbenchers in the Commons), though more work is needed (recognised in particular by Ken Clarke) to strengthen the autonomy and effectiveness of the Commons, and thus to increase the accountability of the executive branch.

While it remains the case that the UK does not have a written constitution in a single codified document, constitutional reforms have ensured that rather more of the constitution is now written down.

A change of Labour leadership might make all the difference to the process and progress of constitutional reform. Blair’s first cabinet contained only two committed supporters of constitutional reform – Robin Cook and Gordon Brown. Brown’s post as Chancellor prevented him from making speeches on the subject, though he has made a growing number of addresses on citizenship and on ‘Britishness’ in recent months. It is therefore highly likely that, should – as is widely expected - he succeed Blair as prime minister, the cause of constitutional reform will be revived.