Iain Duncan Smith: leadership without authority

Paper presented to the:

'Leaders of the Opposition: From Churchill to Cameron' conference,

Friday 9th July 2010

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Abstract

This chapter analyses the tenure of Iain Duncan Smith as leader of the Conservative Party in opposition between September 2001 and October 2003. It argues that his leadership was fatally undermined by a lack of authority within his own party. This problem was derived in part from the manner of his election, during which he received the explicit endorsement of less than a third of his parliamentary colleagues, but flowed more fundamentally from his limitations as a political leader.

Duncan Smith's leadership weaknesses are considered in relation to three main themes. Firstly, he was an ineffectual public communicator. As leader of the opposition he had three main audiences to address: the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP), the wider party (i.e. the membership), and the electorate. In each case he failed to connect successfully, making little impact with the general public and losing the confidence of his parliamentary colleagues and, eventually, the party members whose votes had installed him as leader. Secondly, his leadership was plagued with party management problems, and as the chapter explores, many of these were self-inflicted and eminently avoidable. Thirdly, the chapter suggest that Duncan Smith's personality was ill-suited to the role of leader of the opposition, as his handling of moments of crisis demonstrates the difficulties he experienced coping with the pressures of leadership.

Introduction: the English patient

During the 1998 party conference *The Sun* famously pronounced the Conservative Party dead. As a Hague-faced parrot swung from its perch, the accompanying headline read: 'This party is no more ... it has ceased to be ... this is an ex-party.' The paper diagnosed the cause of death: 'suicide'. As things turned out, contra the original *Monty Python* sketch, the Conservative Party was not totally expired – it had not ceased to be, although it had slipped into a very deep slumber. After the trauma of landslide electoral defeat in 1997 a preference for closing its eyes to the enormous scale of the task of rebuilding its electoral appeal could perhaps be forgiven. No such excuse could be advanced following the deafening wake-up call sounded by the 2001 general election. 'Labour's second landslide' produced another defeat of similar statistical magnitude, arguably the worst result in the Conservative Party's history (Geddes and Tonge, 2001; Tyrie, 2001: 3). If any acclaim can be attributed to the Hague years it is that the doomsday scenario of further losses was averted. Although it remained on life-support, the Conservative Party had at least avoided the fate of the Liberal party and inexorable decline to third party status – political death in a first-past-the-post electoral system. But on almost any measure 2001 represented the nadir of the Conservatives' travails. In terms of seats the Conservatives made a nominal advance of one, although not at the expense of any other party (they regained Tatton, the seat vacated by the independent MP Martin Bell). The performance in terms of votes was little better. At the 2001 election, the Conservatives received 8.35 million votes, over 1.25 million fewer than in 1997. On a substantially reduced turnout, the party's share of the vote advanced by one percent, but the polls suggested that a higher turnout would have worked against them (Butler and Kavanagh, 2002: 251-264; Tyrie, 2001: 5).

The crisis facing the Conservatives in 2001 was also more than an electoral one. It was a crisis of ideology, mission and narrative. As Tim Bale (2010) has argued, under the leadership of William Hague short-term tactics prevailed over any coherent conception of a long-term strategy. The Conservatives under Hague failed to communicate a convincing narrative explaining to the electorate what conservatism was for. In substantial part this reflected a failure of leadership, but more fundamentally it also stemmed from a long-term ideological crisis about the very nature of post-Thatcherite conservatism (Hayton, 2008; Gamble, 1995). One manifestation of this was the sense of ambiguity surrounding Conservative attempts to articulate one of their most traditional themes and pillar of their

electoral support: a clear sense of nationhood. The 1997 election reduced the Conservatives to a rump of 165 MPs largely in the south and east of England, with no representation in Scotland or Wales.[1] In spite of this status as the *de facto* English party the Conservatives remained wedded to a traditional idea of Britain – as Wellings (2007: 410) has argued, 'the historical merging of Englishness and Britishness continued to operate, leaving English nationalism without coherence'. However, in the evolving context of devolution to Scotland and Wales and the broader cultural trend of the emergence of a stronger felt and more clearly defined sense of English identity (Hayton *et al.* 2009) the Conservatives were left without a clear conception of nationhood which they could communicate effectively to the electorate.

This difficulty was symptomatic of the Conservative Party's problems between 1997 and 2001. Unsure of its own purpose, and facing a centrist New Labour government in its ascendency, the Conservative Party under Hague was unable to fashion a convincing response to the question 'why vote Conservative?' and fell back on a core-vote strategy lacking widespread appeal. Following Hague's resignation the Conservatives needed to identify a leader capable of formulating and conveying an answer to that question which would invigorate the party and enthuse the electorate. As Peter Snowdon later commented, 'If ever there was a time for an inspired leader to lift the Tories out of the gloom, it was now' (2010: 75). Who would answer the call for the Conservatives in their hour of need?

At the outset the odds-on favourite with the bookmakers was Michael Portillo, although it was 'not entirely certain that he would even enter the contest' (Alderman and Carter, 2002: 572). Portillo was one of only two men (the other being the former Chancellor, Kenneth Clarke) widely assumed capable of returning the Conservatives to power. Portillo had, however, caused substantial unease amongst former admirers on the right of the party who shared with Thatcher the view that he 'had "lost his way" since his conversion to "touchy feely" Conservatism' (Walters, 2001: 213). For the Thatcherites, Portillo's personal and political journey to an agenda of social liberalism and uncompromising modernisation was less a voyage of discovery and more the confused wanderings of a prodigal son yet to realise the error of his ways and return to the comforts of their ideological home. Had he been willing to compromise and sound a dog-whistle or two he would in all likelihood have made it to the final ballot of party members. Keen to secure a mandate firmly on his own terms he

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[1] They did little better in 2001, winning one seat in Scotland and none in Wales.

was unwilling to do so, and was eliminated by one vote (Hayton and Heppell, 2010: 428). As analysis by Heppell and Hill demonstrated, Portillo's inability to capture the votes of 'pure Thatcherites' proved fatal to his chances: 'it was their abandonment of Portillo that was critical to his elimination and the eventual election of Duncan Smith as party leader' (2010: 50). One Portillo supporter, John Bercow, suggested that the result could be easily understood: 'for Ken's Europhilia substitute Michael's socially liberal credentials'. For him, Portillo 'was clearly the modernising candidate in 2001' but the party 'wasn't ready for and wasn't signed-up to the idea that it needed fundamentally to change its approach' (Bercow Interview).

In short, Iain Duncan Smith's election as Conservative Party leader was less a positive endorsement of either the man or his message, and more to do with who he was not and what he did not represent. In the final parliamentary ballot he received less than a third of the votes available (54 out of 166 MPs supported him). Nonetheless Duncan Smith did achieve a clear victory over Clarke in the ballot of party members, securing 61 percent of the vote on a turnout of 79 percent. However, as Denham and O'Hara have highlighted, the party membership who ultimately selected the leader would have no say about his removal: the 'Hague rules' meant that just 25 MPs could force a vote of confidence, without even the need to nominate an alterative candidate (2008: 66). Right from the off, his position as leader 'seemed precarious' (*ibid*.) – but what, if anything, could he do to enhance his authority and secure it?

In his seminal lecture 'Politics as a Vocation' the sociologist Max Weber (1918) identified three mainstays of legitimate rule: traditional authority; charismatic authority; and formal and/or legal authority derived from holding office. If a custom of deferential obedience was ever enjoyed by Duncan Smith's predecessors it probably died with the 'magic circle' – democratising the leadership selection procedure formalised the existing actuality that incumbents are ultimately beholden to the parliamentary party. The second source Weber noted, charisma – in his words 'a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men' – is perhaps more important than ever for the modern politician. But not even Duncan Smith's most loyal lieutenants would have suggested he was a man of flair with the ability to inspire a devoted following, and his own depiction of himself as the 'quiet man' was a tacit acknowledgment of this fact. Consequently, Duncan Smith needed to establish his authority through an astute management of the capacities

available to him through his position as party leader, to reassure doubtful colleagues that he was indeed 'up to the job'. *As noted elsewhere, 'having commenced his party leadership with a disputed mandate it was essential that Duncan Smith provided the following: first, a viable programme of policy renewal and strategic reorientation; and second, internal unity and effective political leadership' (Hayton and Heppell, 2010: 429).CUT THIS??* This chapter evaluates Duncan Smith's tenure as leader of the opposition in terms of the following criteria. Firstly, his proficiency as a public communicator; secondly, his construction of a public policy platform in opposition; thirdly, his party management ability; and fourthly, his cognitive style and emotional intelligence.

Struggling to be heard: the public communicator

Iain Duncan Smith was an ineffectual public communicator. As leader of the opposition he had three main audiences to address: the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP), the wider party (i.e. the membership), and the electorate. In each case he failed to connect successfully, making little impact with the general public and losing the confidence of his parliamentary colleagues and, eventually, the party members whose votes had installed him as leader.

Defeated leadership contender Michael Portillo commented that Duncan Smith 'wasn't able to perform at the necessary level, so he was desperately undermined by that, and that happened pretty much at once' (Portillo, Interview). In terms of the parliamentary party, this inability was rapidly exposed by Duncan Smith's performances at the despatch box of the House of Commons. For any party leader a key opportunity to rally the troops when the house was sitting was presented weekly at Prime Minister's Question Time. Armed with six questions, the leader of the opposition has the chance to expose the Prime Minister to sustained pressure and scrutiny. Duncan Smith's early performances were measured and overshadowed by international events. The announcement of his accession, originally scheduled for 12th September 2001, was delayed by 24 hours as a mark of respect following the terrorist attacks the previous day. In the aftermath of the 9/11 atrocities Tony Blair bestrode the world stage, and there was little for Duncan Smith to do other than offer his support to the government's stated determination to stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the United States in the 'war on terror'. As Geoffrey Wheatcroft later commented, as 'Blair played the new Churchill… Duncan Smith could only trail in his wake, as he ineffectually did for months to come' (2005: 254).

Duncan Smith was perhaps also unfortunate that he his immediate predecessor William Hague, for all his other weaknesses as Conservative Party leader, was universally recognised as one of the most effective parliamentary performers of his generation, and a master of the quick fire cut and thrust of PMQs. Unfavourable comparisons were inevitable, one of the politer ones being that Duncan Smith was 'Hague without the jokes' (Walters, 2001: 225). Perhaps partly in recognition of his own limitations as a debater, Duncan Smith consciously chose to adopt a less confrontational style than his predecessor, and determinedly stuck to topics which he supposed the public would like him to concentrate on, particularly the public services. This helped to reinforce in efforts to refocus the Conservatives' policy agenda (see below) but made little impression either within or beyond the Westminster village. As the months passed the rumbles of discontent on the Conservative backbenches grew, and the party leader was taunted in the House over his persistent nervous habit of clearing his throat – pitilessly satirised in *Private Eye* as Iain Duncan Cough.

Even as he struggled to satisfy the demands of his colleagues in the Commons, the wider party membership ought to have been Duncan Smith's natural constituency. Ideologically he was certainly one of them, an uncompromising Euro-sceptic with traditionalist views on social and moral matters. In the past he had voted in favour of both hanging and caning, and was, as one *Telegraph* writer observed, 'a bit 1950s' (Wheatcroft, 2005: 255). In his hardworking campaign for the leadership he had also impressed members with solid performances at meetings up and down the country. Once elected however, the most important platform for addressing the party membership was the party conference. Through guaranteed media coverage conference also provides an opportunity to communicate to the electorate at large.

Barely a month after assuming the leadership Duncan Smith's first conference was inevitably overshadowed by the storm clouds of war gathering over Afghanistan, already subject to aerial bombardment and about to face invasion from the American-led mission to overthrow the Taliban. His speech was in large part dedicated to September 11th and its consequences, although much of the remainder was an effort to refocus the Conservatives' attention on the public services. The *Daily Telegraph* (11.10.2001) loyally reported Duncan Smith's pledge to put public services first, although even through the eyes of their sycophantic leader writer – who discerned a vision 'at once more coherent, more original and more promising than

anything the Tories have managed since the 1980s' – as he took the stage he appeared 'momentarily bemused' and 'began nervously'. The late Hugo Young similarly perceived that 'he seemed embarrassed to bestride the platform' and 'doesn't have a shred of excitement about him' and judged that: 'Only the most desperate Tory acolytes could grace a speech of such stupefying dullness with acclaim for its fantastic strategic significance, merely because it committed the party to take state schools and hospitals seriously' (Young, 2001).

The 2002 party conference is best remembered for the pronouncement by the then Chairman Theresa May that the Conservatives needed to work to shed their image as 'the nasty party'. It also featured probably the most memorable phrase of Duncan Smith's leadership, when he urged his party: 'Do not underestimate the determination of a quiet man.' This undisguised effort to make virtue out of necessity was a direct acknowledgment of his own shortcomings as an orator, and it might have worked, had he been able to convincingly demonstrate his attributes as a leader in other ways. He could not, and when he returned to the theme the following year – announcing in a toe-curling tone that 'the quiet man is here to stay, and he's turning up the volume' – he found that it was a noise that few even in his own party wanted to hear. His foray into modernisation over, Duncan Smith pressed all the traditionalist buttons he hoped would appeal to his core constituency in the party membership. Simon Hoggart (2003) observed that it was 'road rage politics'; while in the opinion of another commentator: 'Duncan Smith knocked back his opponents by playing to every bigoted bone in the Tory body politic' and 'flunked' the real challenge, which was 'to get cheers for the new face the party needs to show if it is to crawl back towards power' (Glover, 2003).

For the modern politician the most important forum for communicating with the electorate is the news media. Television, radio, newspapers and increasingly the internet provide space for political leaders to project their message to the public, albeit in most cases without any assurances as to how it will be filtered and presented. Unfortunately for him, Duncan Smith proved similarly ineffective as a media performer as he was in the House of Commons and on the conference platform. Through his efforts to develop the language of 'compassionate conservatism' and his stated desire to 'champion the vulnerable' Duncan Smith demonstrated an appreciation of the need to tackle one of the major electoral problems that the Conservative Party faced – namely its nasty party image. However, his poor communication skills greatly hindered him in this task, and he made little progress – on most measures Conservative Party image data remained stubbornly negative (Hayton, 2008: 96-99).

As Richard Heffernan has argued, the media is an important leadership resource, 'but it is only one resource amongst many'. As he suggests, media attention, and even media management by spin doctors, is of little use to a leader who lacks other key skills and attributes. Heffernan notes: 'The stark reality is that while media image can help boost a prime minister's public standing, that public standing will inevitably trump that media image' (2006: 598). The same is true for leaders of the opposition. The media served to expose Duncan Smith's lack of aptitude as a communicator and his other shortcomings as a leader. As Snowdon suggests, he 'failed to get his message across because he failed to present it imaginatively and convincingly' (Snowdon, 2010: 93-4). This failure extended to each of the leader's key constituencies: the electorate, the party membership, backbenchers and even key figures in his shadow cabinet. Whatever the merits of his message it was poorly conveyed, inconsistently presented, and largely ignored.

On the quiet: building a policy platform

Despite his reputation as a traditionalist hardliner, Duncan Smith showed signs of having heeded some of the lessons of defeat. Within weeks of being elected leader, he expressed his desire to re-establish the Conservative Party as 'the party of ideas' by launching a policy review (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005: 259). Duncan Smith also sought to orchestrate a concerted effort by the Conservatives to reposition themselves as a party of the public services, an agenda that would outlive his leadership and be taken into the 2005 general election and beyond. Members of the shadow cabinet made speeches and wrote articles on the subject of schools, hospitals and crime consistently over the four years following his election. Oliver Letwin, for example, made a series of speeches on the 'Neighbourly Society', a thoughtful form of conservatism that sought to go beyond free markets (Letwin, 2003). The process of policy renewal made progress under Duncan Smith, and his record in this regard compares favourably to that of his predecessor (Seldon and Snowdon, 2005: 259-62). By realigning the Conservatives' policy priorities Duncan Smith hoped to bring about a strategic reorientation of the party, so that it was once again seen to be speaking to issues of public concern and reoccupying the political centre ground dominated by New Labour. He recalled that: 'I had a sense that the public needed to instinctively begin to re-identify with the party that they felt cared about what they did – a big challenge' (Duncan Smith Interview).

He used his first anniversary as party leader to declare publicly his desire to defeat 'the five giants' blighting Britain's poorest communities. The targets he selected – 'failing schools, crime, substandard healthcare, child poverty, and insecurity in old age' – were less instructive than the language he chose to employ, which deliberately echoed that of the Beveridge Report (Duncan Smith, 2002; Seldon and Snowdon, 2005: 260-1). The aim of this was not to win votes for the Conservative Party in the most deprived areas of Britain, rather Duncan Smith believed that: 'We needed to broaden the party out, stretch the elastic out a bit. And that meant going further and deeper than we'd been before' (Duncan Smith Interview). Arguably, only a figure from the right such as Duncan Smith could pursue such a strategy, as it drew criticism from that wing of the party (Cowley and Green, 2005: 52). As one early assessment of his leadership speculated, Duncan Smith's 'willingness to question some longstanding party totems suggests that the right-wing credentials that secured his election may yet enable him to institute a transformation of the Conservative Party, just as Neil Kinnock's left-wing roots helped him to initiate the modernisation of the Labour Party in the 1980s' (Alderman and Carter, 2002: 585). Indeed, seven months into Duncan Smith's tenure his defeated opponent for the leadership, Ken Clarke – who during the contest had (accurately) labelled his opponent 'a hanger and a flogger' – declared himself 'surprised and delighted' by his party leader's efforts to move the Conservatives to the centre ground, particularly through his focus on poverty (Murphy, 2002).

Although Duncan Smith won some unlikely plaudits – he was also praised in late-2002 by Michael Portillo (2002) for resisting the 'constant temptation' of a right-wing populist agenda – the effort to renew the Conservative Party policy platform was far from unproblematic. One difficulty was that in spite of the greater persistence of Duncan Smith compared to his predecessor, notable inconsistencies remained across a range of policy issues. This reflected the continued absence of a coherent overall narrative to bind the (albeit still embryonic) Conservative programme together. This disjointed approach flowed from the leader himself, as Duncan Smith 'oscillated' between a modernising and more traditionalist approach, in part simply in an effort to appease different elements within his own party (Bale, 2010: 159). The result was inconsistent signals to the electorate and the risk of appearing opportunistic. Some decisions, such as that to oppose the planned introduction of university top-up fees and the pledge to restore the earnings link to future rises in the state pension, prompted the latter fear even amongst some members of the shadow cabinet (Snowdon, 2010: 94).

Behind many of these difficulties lay a strategic dilemma which Duncan Smith was far from resolving, namely how could the Conservatives balance their desire for lower taxes with the new dedication to public services? (Taylor, 2005: 144-153). This problem led to disagreement between the Conservative leader and his Shadow Chancellor, Michael Howard. To give credence to the public services narrative Howard wanted to reassure voters that the education and health budgets would be prioritised over tax cuts, by pledging to match Labour's spending plans (Snowdon, 2010: 94). This commitment was suddenly dropped in July 2002, as Duncan Smith caved-in to pressure from the right-wing press and the right of his parliamentary party. This effectively neutered Conservative efforts to gain ground from the government on these issues, as 'any criticism the Conservatives made of the two services the public most cared about could easily be countered by asking them (endlessly but nonetheless effectively) how precisely they planned to improve those services by spending less' (Bale, 2010: 159).

While some inchoate thinking by Duncan Smith undoubtedly contributed to this difficulty, had either Clarke or Portillo secured the Conservative leadership in 2001 they would have faced a similar dilemma over how to respond to the Blairite Labour hegemony. The context of a public perception of economic crisis and national decline, which had given Thatcherite solutions their electoral appeal, no longer applied. The Labour Party had successfully made the funding and improvement of public services the electorate's key concern, by accepting the free market in many areas but questioning the extent to which untrammelled market liberalism and privatisation could deliver them effectively. Even as market-based initiatives such as the Private Finance Initiative (PFI) have been spread throughout the public services, Labour successfully preserved the mass state provision of health and education services free at the point of delivery. In this sense, the major accomplishment and legacy of the Blair government was the fencing-off of a distinct public sector, and the apparent creation of a new consensus on the scope of the state in the early twenty-first century. Under Duncan Smith, like Hague before him, Conservative thinking on policy continued to be framed firmly within Thatcherite ideological parameters, and consequently the party 'evolved neither a convincing narrative nor effective statecraft' in answer to this quandary (Taylor, 2005: 152).

Party management: The officer's mess

Duncan Smith's leadership was plagued by party management problems, many of which a more adroit leader might have sidestepped or diffused. His downfall after little more than two years in office – which left the former Scots Guardsman with the ignominious honour of being the first Conservative Party leader since Neville Chamberlain not to take his party into a general election – may have been avoided had he demonstrated a greater aptitude in this regard. Indeed, a key attraction to Duncan Smith's colleagues of his successor Michael Howard was the latter's reputation as a firm disciplinarian who would bring order to the parliamentary party. Some of Duncan Smith's party management problems undoubtedly derived from the fact that he was not the first choice leader of a majority of his parliamentary colleagues. Nonetheless, lacking the skill to make the best out of bad job, he contrived to make a difficult situation worse.

One episode that served to illustrate both Duncan Smith's ineptitude as a party manager and the problematic context he faced was the row that exploded over the ostensibly minor issue of the passage of the government's Adoption and Children Bill in November 2002. The House of Lords had amended the legislation to the effect that only married couples could adopt children, and the government sought to repeal these revisions in the Commons to grant unmarried and same-sex couples equal rights. For Labour and the Liberal Democrats, this was relatively uncontroversial (Dorey, 2004: 376). For the Conservatives however, it was much more contentious, exposing once again tensions in the party between social liberals and social traditionalists which had become a notable source of disagreement during the Hague years (Hayton, 2008: 169-199).

The dilemma for the party was whether they should follow prominent modernisers such as Portillo in taking a liberal view and accepting these different forms of family life, or continue to advocate the primacy of marriage, which for the majority of Conservative MPs remained their preferred model for raising children. The easiest way out of this difficulty for Duncan Smith would have been to allow a free vote, but as a staunch social traditionalist himself he instead chose to impose a three-line whip against the changes. The result was a public split and a leadership crisis that was 'almost entirely self-inflicted and eminently avoidable' (Cowley & Stuart, 2004: 357). Thirty-five Conservatives absented themselves from the Commons, and eight MPs defied the whip and voted against the party line. The eight included ex-leadership challengers Clarke and Portillo; four former Shadow Cabinet members (David Curry, Andrew Lansley, Andrew Mackay and Francis Maude); and most

damagingly, John Bercow, who resigned from the Shadow Cabinet in order to rebel (Cowley & Stuart, 2004: 357). This marked a turning point both for Duncan Smith's leadership and for party management of sexual/moral political issues in the PCP. In terms of issue management, the lesson for the Conservatives was clear: the party was divided, and free votes on 'conscience' issues offered the most effective means to prevent them from attracting media interest and becoming public displays of disunity. Duncan Smith adopted this tactic when, in March 2003, the government once again brought forward legislation to repeal Section 28, and it was also used by Cameron and Howard.

Underlying the gay adoption row was a more fundamental intraparty disagreement that dogged Duncan Smith's leadership, namely the debate over whether, and how, the party should seek to 'modernise' in an effort to rejuvenate its image and broaden its appeal. Back in 1998 *The Times* had argued that the key dividing line in the Conservative Party was no longer over Europe or between left and right, but that: 'the real division is between liberals and reactionaries, modernisers and traditionalists, those armed primarily with principle and those whose first instinct is to take shelter in institutions'. Furthermore, for the Conservatives to regain power, the 'liberals must first win the battle of ideas within their party' (*The Times*, 1998). The leader went on:

> The more important argument the Conservative Party still needs to have is between those sensitive to changing times and those inclined to nostalgia. It is a battle, we believe, between Tory Mods and Rockers. In the Sixties the former were those comfortable with change, the latter those who followed old fads. It is the difference between those with a gaze fixed on new horizons and those either blinkered or still dreaming.

In other words, advocates of modernisation suggested that regardless of their personal preferences, electoral necessity demanded that Conservatives recognise the changing society in which they had to operate. The result of the 2001 leadership election, however, represented a clear defeat for 'the mods' – both candidates presented to the party membership (Ken Clarke and Iain Duncan Smith) eschewed the 'modernising' label, its chief advocate (Portillo) having been eliminated by the final ballot of MPs.

By his own admission Duncan Smith disliked the concept of modernisation, which he associated with a rejection of the core tenets of conservatism. In spite of this he did actively pursue what he preferred to call a 'change' agenda. This left him in the ill-fated position of being attacked both by modernisers who were unconvinced by his efforts to change the party,

and by traditionalists who felt that such moves went too far. Lacking a bedrock of support in the PCP Duncan Smith displayed 'an increasing tendency to match each modernizing move with something for the traditionalists' (Bale, 2010: 159) – an approach destined to infuriate rather than placate both camps.

Tim Bale offers a damning indictment of Duncan Smith's record at managing his party, noting that he: 'presided over a party that at times had descended into institutional chaos, a party that was unable to call on the services of many of its most talented individuals, a party that that eventually lost the confidence of the economic interests that funded it...' (Bale, 2010: 193). It is impossible to effectively defend Duncan Smith against any of these charges. Major donors deserted the Conservatives, making it clear that they would not reopen their chequebooks until a new leader was in place. Heavyweight figures such as Clarke, Portillo and Francis Maude refused to serve under him, but even from the limited pool of talent available Duncan Smith's shadow cabinet appointments drew disproportionally from the right of the party. Finally, the leader's inability to prevent or contain the disunity and dissent that plagued the party was exacerbated by his own vacillations on strategy. To meet Duncan Smith's professed desire to 'change' the Conservative Party required a leader with a more coherent approach pursued with greater resolve than he was able to muster.

Cognitive style and emotional intelligence

Political scientists tend to downplay the significance of personality in politics, preferring instead institutional, structural or ideological explanations. Politicians themselves often denigrate the media for its seemingly ceaseless interest in the character of political figures – which allegedly comes at the expense of an adequate focus on policy or ideas. Yet the individual personalities of political leaders often play a crucial role in political outcomes: different characters shape events in quite different ways. Even in the case of perhaps the most imposing figure in post-war British politics, Margaret Thatcher, 'political scientists have lavished attention on Thatcherism and its impact, but they have not written much about the woman herself' (Garnett, 2007: 173). In the case of Duncan Smith elite interviews and insider accounts his tenure lead to the unavoidable conclusion that concerns over his individual character, aptitude and personality were at the forefront of his parliamentary colleagues'

minds when they removed him from office.[2] Indeed for some, these doubts were firmly in their minds during his leadership election campaign. As Bale diplomatically noted, 'Duncan Smith's biggest problem was that he was not renowned among his colleagues for being the sharpest knife in the draw' (2010: 138). The perception that he was not up to the job dogged his leadership, and Duncan Smith did little to dispel it with his poor handling of various crises that he faced.

The previous section discussed how Duncan Smith induced a severe party management difficulty for himself through his decision to impose a three-line whip on what many regarded as a vote of conscience. Duncan Smith interpreted this rebellion as a conspiracy designed to destabilise his leadership, and compounded his initial error by seeking to reassert his authority through a crackdown on the dissenters. The next day he made a statement on the steps of Conservative Central Office calling for the party to 'unite or die'. In it, he declared that he had 'begun to reconnect the Conservative Party with the views and attitudes of contemporary Britain' – an odd claim given that many in his own party were concerned that his position on gay adoption was out of touch with modern Britain. Equally, he asserted that he was leading the party with unity in mind, 'respecting those who would like me to move faster and those who feel threatened by our moving at all'. However:

> Over the last few weeks a small group of my parliamentary colleagues have decided consciously to undermine my leadership. For a few, last night's vote was not about adoption but an attempt to challenge my mandate to lead this party. We cannot go on in this fashion. We have to pull together or we will hang apart.

The fact that Duncan Smith even felt the need to make an extraordinary appeal to the party barely a year into his leadership illustrated the perilous nature of his position, and it was strongly rumoured that he was on the brink of resignation (Brogan & Helm, 2002). The normally sympathetic *Daily Telegraph* described it as 'the most desperate day in the history of the Conservative Party' (Young, 2002). Kenneth Clarke attacked the party leader's handling of the 'entirely self-induced' crisis (Jones *et al.*, 2002), and within days a YouGov/*Telegraph* opinion poll revealed that 52 percent of Conservative voters thought that the election of Duncan Smith had been a mistake. Moreover, 81 percent of supporters and 75 percent of party members thought he had mishandled the adoption issue by failing to allow MPs a free vote (Helm and Sylvester, 2002).

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[2] See Bale (2010: 134-193); Hayton (2008); Hayton & Heppell (2010); and Snowdon (2010: 75-119).

Duncan Smith's handling of this crisis is an interesting case-study in how he struggled to cope with the pressures of leadership. For Snowdon, it was after this 'desperate appeal for unity' that 'the Shadow Cabinet lost all hope' (2010: 107). Rick Nye, who was head of the Conservative Research Department at the time, noted that: 'the more pressure he was under, the more nervous he got and the more desperate he was to show he was in control' (quoted in Snowdon, 2010: 107). As Duncan Smith's insecurities grew, his judgement diminished. Increasingly mistrustful of those around him, a few months later he sacked Nye; party chief executive Mark McGregor; and director of field operations Stephen Gilbert from Central Office. This purge smacked of desperation and panic, and worse was to follow. The leader's choice of replacement for McGregor, former Maastricht rebel Barry Legg, reflected his increasing tendency to assign key posts to friends and close allies rather than to the best qualified candidates available. His decision to announce Legg's appointment without even consulting the Party Board (which was technically responsible for it as Legg would be a party employee) provoked fury, and 'risked alienating the constituency representatives whose presumed loyalty was one of the main reasons why Tory MPs (who were also worried about appearing to stab him in the back while the country was at war) were staying their hands before the local elections' (Bale, 2010: 174). Legg lasted less than three months in the role before being forced out, and Duncan Smith was also forced to back down over the removal of Gilbert who was 'reinstated following protests from the board' (Snowdon, 2010: 110). In attempting to crush dissent and shore-up his own position, Duncan Smith's seemingly irrational decisions only served to further undermine it. His leadership style was a bizarre mix of a consensual balancing act on one hand, as he tried to please both modernisers and traditionalists at the expense of sticking to a clear agenda of his own; interspersed with dictatorial snaps which ultimately only served to highlight his lack of authority.

Conclusion

For any leader of the opposition the key test is the electoral one: can they return their party to power? Unable to convince his parliamentary colleagues that they had any hope of victory under his leadership, Duncan Smith was denied the opportunity to take his party into a general election, removed by a vote of no confidence in October 2003. This represented an ignominious failure on his part, and history will necessarily judge him harshly as a leader lacking authority in his own party, let alone in the country. Yet if he did not sow the seeds of

electoral recovery he did at least begin to till the land, making a serious attempt to begin the process of policy renewal – work that he would continue out of office through the establishment of a think-tank, the Centre for Social Justice.

A poor public communicator and disastrous party manager, Duncan Smith unable to persuade either his shadow cabinet or the parliamentary party of the virtues of his reorientation strategy. He was undermined by a lack of legitimacy, having secured the support of less than one third of his parliamentary colleagues in the 2001 leadership election. Duncan Smith had some success shifting the Conservatives' focus away from core vote issues, although even this effort was undermined by wavering by the leader himself. His handling of the question of adoption rights for gay couples was a cataclysmic failure of party management, and became symbolic of the wider sense of his failure as leader. His tactical ineptitude brutally exposed ideological divisions and led directly to the end of his leadership. Despite his efforts to widen electoral appeal by developing the party's policies on public services and social justice, Duncan Smith was unable to gain support from the modernisers while precisely those efforts weakened his support amongst traditionalists. Encumbered by his own rebellious past, he could not inspire the confidence or loyalty of his colleagues. In short, Duncan Smith failed the most basic test of political leaders, namely the need to establish and maintain his authority. The manner of his election granted him little authority in the PCP, and he proved unable to establish it through charisma, political skill or through the exercise of his office. Without authority his leadership was doomed.

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