

**The World Has Changed - So Must The Tories**  
**By Jason Miks**

With the annual conference season over, British politics can again turn its focus to Westminster as the parties return for the new Parliamentary session. For the main opposition Conservative Party, the daily political grind is likely to feel like something of sideshow until the business of choosing a new leader is over. Yet if the Party which once saw itself as the natural party of government wants to return to power in the foreseeable future, then it should make a clear break with the past and back David Cameron as the best man to lead it into the next election.

The leadership campaign proper has only recently kicked off officially, but the main contenders have been jostling for position and supporters at least since Michael Howard, the current leader, announced his intention to step down the morning after the party suffered another heavy general election loss in May.

Mr Howard, the third Tory leader in succession to suffer a comprehensive defeat at the hands of Tony Blair's New Labour, opted against resigning immediately and instead indicated he would wait until November to step down and trigger a new leadership contest. Although his stated aim was to allow the party time for reflection, the decision has had the unwanted effect of leaving the party somewhat rudderless for several months. The other rationale behind his decision, to allow the party an opportunity to change the rules of the leadership contest and to move the power of selection back to MPs and away from party members, was made redundant when the proposal was voted down last month.

In retrospect it now seems that Mr Howard would have been better to follow an approach more like that of Japan's Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which recently elected a new leader within days of a heavy defeat to the incumbent Liberal Democratic Party. Yet though that chance has passed the party can - and should - still take a cue from the DPJ who decided that a break with the past provided them with the best chance of victory in the future. And as in Japan it is a youthful reformer who offers the greater chance of transforming his party's fortunes.

Mr Cameron's centre-right speech to the party conference this week was well received by delegates with its reformist rhetoric blended with more familiar Tory staples of tax cuts and personal responsibility. As Shadow Education Secretary he has worked hard over the summer to develop a positive, centre-right vision focusing strongly on the issues of school reform - including allowing schools to set their own admission criteria - and urban regeneration. And he was careful to note when promoting the importance of the family,

including his desire to implement tax breaks for married couples, that these families 'come in all shapes and sizes.'

Rhetoric such as this, if sincere, is going to be essential if the Tories are to shed the impression that they are out of date and out of touch. As Mr Cameron has already noted the Conservative Party has fallen to third place amongst under 35s and the party must find some way of re-connecting with voters who are increasingly interested in 'quality of life' issues alongside their personal finances.

There is some concern about his age and experience – he is only 38 years old. Yet many voters may see this freshness as an advantage. And he will anyway be 42 in 2009 – when the next general election is likely to be held – just a year younger than Tony Blair was when he became Prime Minister.

However, Mr Cameron's path to the leadership still looks fraught with difficulty and he faces major challenges from both the left and right of his party. The challenge from the right is perhaps the most formidable especially from David Davis, currently Shadow Home Secretary, who spent several months as the clear favourite. Although his conference speech was heavily criticised in the press, he still has a good chance of gaining sufficient votes from his Parliamentary colleagues to take his place as one of the two contenders who will be presented to party members to vote on.

Yet though he may be popular amongst the party membership, Mr Davis is unlikely to broaden the party's base sufficiently – especially amongst younger voters – to allow it to have a realistic chance of victory in the next election. And broaden its base the party certainly needs to do. The average party member is over 65 years old - clearly a problem for any party's long term health.

Voting for Mr Davis, as able as he might be in the Commons, would merely repeat the mistakes of the last three leaders who were rejected as out of touch and at times just too negative for most voters. Though he has gone to great lengths to broaden his appeal by emphasizing his upbringing on a council estate, his record suggests that he could fall back on the harsh, divisive rhetoric of his predecessors that has so alienated the electorate. There are also lingering doubts about how broad his support is within his own party. Many of his colleagues are said not to trust him and there is a real danger that his selection would only exacerbate the self destructive infighting that has marked the Tories' 8 years in opposition.

The other big test for Mr Cameron is overcoming the leadership challenge of Kenneth Clarke, by far the biggest political heavyweight on the opposition benches, and whose political experience includes stints as Secretary of State for Health, Education, Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer.

This is Mr Clarke's third bid for the shadow leader's position, following unsuccessful attempts in 1997 and 2001. He undoubtedly has the greatest

name recognition and is also popular with the electorate, with one poll over the summer showing him the clear favourite amongst voters at large.

Yet such numbers are likely a product as much as anything else of a familiar name and amiable public image. In this sense Mr Clarke is something of a comfort candidate - a likeable old boy who promises a return to the good old days. But reassuring as this may feel, the party must resist this temptation to look in on itself and back to its glory years - the world has moved on and so must the Party.

Mr Clarke undoubtedly gave himself some extra room for political manoeuvre against the Prime Minister through his criticism of the Government's decision to support military action in Iraq – and likely broadened his appeal to some of the very voters the Tories are courting. But the war is likely to diminish as an electoral issue, and voters anyway are unlikely to be inclined towards punishing Mr Blair's likely successor, Gordon Brown, for a decision which most attach so firmly to Mr Blair himself. And at 65 Mr Clarke hardly seems the long term face of the party.

The Conservative Party has lurched to the right three times in its search for a leader, yet the electorate has made clear twice at the polls that it doesn't have faith in the Party's choices. If the Tories are to have any chance of turning their fortunes around they need to engage with the electorate at large – get out the base tactics that the Republicans employ to such good effect in the US isn't viable in the UK because the Tory base simply isn't big enough.

David Cameron has been billed by his supporters as the Conservative's answer to Tony Blair, and he believes that he has a real chance of fighting Labour on the political centre ground which it seized in 1997. In the interests of the party's future, Conservative members should give him the chance to prove that he is right.

