Bagehot | The endgame

Gordon Brown faces disaster and David Cameron triumph—or is it the other way around?

THERE has been heated debate in Conservative circles over whether, in office, David Cameron will prove a Heath or a Thatcher—ie, will he be buffeted by events like Ted Heath, Tory prime minister from 1970 to 1974, or shape them like The Lady? Yet now another, prior question seems more pressing: is Mr Cameron a Blair or a Kinnock? In other words, will he take his reconstituted party into government like Tony Blair, whose 1997 electoral strategy Mr Cameron's cabal studied and emulated? Or, as Neil Kinnock did when he led Labour in 1992, will he stutter at the last?

The answer will be supplied by the general-election campaign that formally (and finally) begins with Gordon Brown's imminent visit to the queen. This campaign matters: its outcome, which once seemed preordained, is in genuine doubt.

Mr Cameron says in our interview with him (see page 57) that, for him, only securing an outright majority in the House of Commons will count as a win. Most Tories agree. Yet that prospect has receded since the start of 2010. And worryingly for Mr Cameron, the causes seem to be partly beyond his control. They include the political dividend Labour has enjoyed from the economic recovery (weak though it is), and a generalised loathing of politicians in the wake of the parliamentary-expenses scandal, which has blunted his message of renewal.

But there is something else. Even as the Tory poll lead has narrowed (though it has picked up a little this week), large majorities of voters consistently say they want change. The explanation for this apparent contradiction lies in an impressively resilient distrust of Tory motives, dating from folkloric events of 20 years ago and more. These two reflexes—disillusionment with Labour, but a visceral dislike of the Tories—crop up in conversations about politics across the country. If the latter predominates over the former, Mr Cameron may (soon) be remembered as a leader who strove to detoxify his party, but didn't quite manage it: like Mr Kinnock, who began the work of modernising Labour that Mr Blair completed, and who lost the 1992 election to an unloved prime minister, during a recession.

On the other hand, Mr Cameron may yet rally to win his majority and end Labour's long rule. If he does, defeat may be only the beginning of Labour's woe.

Sensible Labour people recognise that dividing colleagues and policies into the old categories of Blairite and Brownite has become redundant. All the same, if Labour loses, that anachronistic thinking and the concomitant grudges may dominate debate about the party's future. A noisy wing will blame the debacle on the Iraq- and lucre-tainted "Blairite" faction. Their case will be boosted by the perception, widespread in the party, that the financial crisis has made a more interventionist, redistributive stance viable. The weaker Labour becomes after the election, the greater the sway its trade-union backers will enjoy. Put all that together, and it is possible that Labour will soon consign itself to another long spell of unelectability.

Alternatively, it and Mr Brown may just pull off the most staggering political comeback in living memory.

For Labour, success is more generously defined. A draw is often a moral victory for one of the combatants; at this election, a hung parliament, particularly one in which Labour was the biggest party, might count as a win for the incumbent, considering all the reasons to expect a Labour meltdown. The party has been in office for 13 years; it has presided over a protracted, deep recession; it is led by a prime minister who for much of his tenure has been the most unpopular on record, and about whom half the cabinet can scarcely find a nice word to say when his job is in peril; and so on. In these circumstances, if Mr Brown were somehow to cling on in Downing Street—no longer unthinkable—he will have morphed from Mr Bean to triumphant Lazarus.

Finally Nick Clegg, who has long prophesied the break-up of the duopoly that has dominated British politics for almost a century. He and his Liberal Democrats may be scythed back down to inconsequential size. Or, if the parliamentary arithmetic is kind to him, in a little over a month Mr Clegg could be in the cabinet.

Lights, camera, redaction

What will determine which of these versions of the near future comes to pass? Turnout on polling day will be a factor: one big Labour fear is that lots of their erstwhile supporters will stay at home. Tactical voting—likely to be directed against both Labour and the Tories in different constituencies—will be another. A third will be the varying strength of Mr Cameron's personal appeal in different regions of the country. Most important, perhaps, will be the extent to which marginal seats swing more enthusiastically to the Tories than safer ones. (The impact of Mr Blair's return to British politics, to help his old adversary Mr Brown see off his imitator Mr Cameron, is another unknown. Labour is hoping that voters have forgotten what it was about him they had come to find so nauseating by the time he left office.)

The next few weeks will probably have many of the traditional features of British election campaigns: the fanfared launch of manifestos that few people read; the nobbling of a leader by some implacable member of the public during a walkabout; a violent row over an allegedly neglected hospital patient. But there will also be a new focus: the televised debates between the three leaders. Analysis of them will dominate campaign coverage; for all the talk about the galvanising power of new media, this old one will be more important than ever. And because they are a novelty, the debates may actively shift opinion, rather than merely congealing it as they tend to in America.

This election will be more competitive and exciting than once seemed possible. Bagehot still predicts a narrow Tory win. ■

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