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DATE : 28/01 / 2002

HEURE : 18h 30

SALLE :

DUREE : 3h

NOM DU PROFESSEUR RESPONSABLE :

Mmes STIRLING, THIEC, LE SEUNE, M. ZBIKAUSKI, CARBONI

## Sounding the death-knell for Conservative England

IAIN MacWHIRTER

He may be the eternal warrior against complacency, but few will take seriously the prime minister's warning that "this is going to be a far tougher fight than people imagine". Frankly, the prospect of a Labour defeat is about as remote as Tommy Sheridan<sup>(1)</sup> joining the Tory party - it's not inconceivable, but there's not a lot of point in talking about it right now.

No government in history has entered a general election campaign with such a massive lead. The UK opinion polls throughout April - not an easy month with the foot-and-mouth epidemic dominating the news - showed Labour holding a consistent 15-point lead. The latest Mori polls - in the *Times* and the *Sun* - have shown Labour even further ahead.

Of course, the only poll that matters - as politicians always remind us - is the one on June 7. Opinion polls have been wrong before (remember 1992), but it is an insult to the nation's intelligence to suggest that the unanimity of the polling organisations indicates anything other than another massive majority - perhaps even greater than the 179 seats after the previous general election.

The Conservatives know this perfectly well, whatever William Hague has to say on the stump.<sup>(2)</sup> Indeed, some Tory spinners<sup>(3)</sup> have even started to play up the extent of Labour's lead. Central Office has been hinting that the Tories' internal polls are showing them doing even more badly than in the published ones.

The thinking behind this most uncharacteristic defeatism is presumably that it will galvanise bedrock Tories<sup>(4)</sup> to get out and vote. It will also make anything less than a catastrophic defeat on June 7 seem like an achievement.

This is a policy borne of despair, but it could work after a fashion. Such are the huge expectations of Labour's majority this time - the *Sun* predicts a majority of more than 200 seats - that anything less than a three-figure majority is going to look almost like a setback for Blair.

If Labour was to "slump" to only 90 seats, the Tories might be able to claim that they are on their way back. It may not be enough to save William Hague, but it could save the British Conservative Party.

For make no mistake, there is a real threat to the future of Britain's principal opposition party. As the former Labour deputy leader, Roy Hattersley, has pointed out, if Labour wins another landslide, it could result in "the near extinction of Her Majesty's Opposition".

There is profound despondency in the Tory salons in London's clubland about the state of the party. They don't understand why their message is not getting across.

After all, Tories own most of the British press and they have been playing relentlessly on the Tory themes of Europe, asylum, taxes, - but to no avail.

In Westminster, there is a theory going round that we could be witnessing the "strange death of Conservative England" (they're already pushing up the daisies in Scotland) to paraphrase George Dangerfield's classic study of the death of Liberal England in the early decades of the past century.

Apocalyptic stuff; but don't think it couldn't happen. After all, Margaret Thatcher did the same to socialism in the 1980s.

It is possible that the British Conservative Party could be so fatally damaged by this result that it either becomes a marginal force on the fringes of British politics, or it transforms itself so completely - as New Labour has - that it becomes almost unrecognisable.

Roy Hattersley knows all about political extinction, having been there, done that, under Neil Kinnock. But he goes on to warn that another Blair landslide would damage not just the Tories, but British democracy itself.

So, could we be entering a new era of one-party government in Britain?

More even than Thatcher, Tony Blair has centralised political power in his hands. With another Labour landslide, you can forget parliament, the cabinet, the Treasury, and Whitehall, too. Tony Blair will drive his ambitious reform agenda (we've seen nothing yet) from Number 10.

He'll be advised by an inner cabinet, the transmission belt will be the cabinet office (not the Treasury, Gordon Brown be warned), and we'll be kept informed through a government information service which is under the control of Alastair Campbell.

This general election will also confirm the extent to which power has been devolved to parliaments and assemblies. The PM's key campaign themes yesterday - law and order, health, education - are all Holyrood responsibilities.

He may win this election, but Tony Blair will face tougher opposition in the referendum on membership of the European single currency, which he has promised (subject to the chancellor's "tests") within two years.

And assuming he wins it, Britain will become part of a European Union, which, as Chancellor Schroeder has helpfully indicated, is likely to evolve in a federal direction.

So there is a paradox here. The prime minister is becoming ever more powerful, just as he is losing power, above and below, to different levels of government. I don't think Tony Blair will be worrying too much about all that in the next three weeks. He just wants to be lifted, lifted . . .

- (1) knell : an indication of the end or the failure of something.
- (2) Tommy Sheridan is the only member of the Scottish Parliament for the Scottish Socialist Party.
- (3) Stump: place for public speaking
- (4) Spinners: spin doctors
- (5) Bedrock: traditional
- (6) Holyrood = the Scottish Parliament

Vous avez 3 heures pour traiter les questions suivantes :

- (1) Discuss the date and source of the article. (3 pts)
- (2) Explain (in detail) the main topic of the article. You must illustrate your development by quoting pertinent expressions or words used by the journalist. (3 pts)
- (3) Explain what the author means when he says that New Labour has so completely transformed itself that it has become unrecognisable (lines 47-48) (3 pts)
- (4) What is Ian MacWhirter criticizing when he writes: "...will be kept informed ....Alastair Campbell".(l.58-60) (3 pts)
- (5) Comment on the following quotation (l.71): "...he is losing power, above and below, to different levels of government", by referring to what you know about the British constitution and to the ideas on Europe and devolution mentioned in the text.(3 pts)
- (6) Discuss the British election system, the resulting two-party system, and the reforms that have been suggested. (5 pts)