

Global Vision

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THE NEXT BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION

All to play for



BY ROBIN ASHBY

Here in the UK we're still on course for a General Election on or before Thursday 5th May 2010, with the latest suggestions being a snap election early in 2010.

Over 200 Members of Parliament – a third of the total – are expected to retire. More will lose their seats. Britain as a result is faced with its least experienced Parliament for a hundred years. As a result, the Executive – Ministers and the Civil Service – will be more powerful than ever. There will be fewer “old hands” to hold them to account and lots of new and inexperienced people more intent on climbing the greasy pole to become Ministers themselves than on rocking the boat. The Whips – the enforcers of Party discipline – will likely be all powerful in the Parliament to come.

The Labour Party of Prime Minister Gordon Brown is in the doldrums.

Public opinion at the moment wants to best them, regardless of what they say or do. But it doesn't really know what it wants as an alternative. Just prior to the long summer recess – three months in length – the Government suffered a humiliating by-election defeat. A semi rural seat which it had won in Blair's 1997 landslide went to the polls to replace its MP who had resigned. Labour's absolute vote and share of the overall vote were slashed, and a young female Conservative candidate romped home. However, a closer look at the figures shows that this was not the overwhelming endorsement of David Cameron's Conservative Party as was projected. At the last General Election in 2005 the Conservatives achieved 33% of the national vote – and got exactly the same in this constituency. In the by-election they received 39% of the vote – at the bottom end of current national opinion polls.

Labour did so badly because of the plethora of opposing candidates – Conservative; Liberal Democrat; Green; UK Independence Party; British National Party; Monster Raving Loony Party and other Independents. All except the self avowed Loonies won seats in the recent European Parliamentary elections, which unlike our winner-take-all system, are by proportional representation on a regional list basis. This means that a party mustering as little as 8% in say London can win a seat in the European Parliament.

At 39% the Conservatives would be hard pressed to win an overall majority at the General Election because of the vagaries of constituency boundaries. On this basis some pundits forecast no overall control, with the Conservatives as the largest party. This could mean a



coalition government, which we have not seen in Britain since the 1930s. And bearing in mind the global economic crisis, then and now, the parallels are uncanny.

Senior Conservative figures admit privately that victory is by no means assured. In many ways, 2010 will be an election to lose. The UK Government borrowing is forecast to rise spectacularly, some will want to slash and burn public spending. There's already talk of a hike in Value Added Tax (Sales Tax) to raise revenues, despite the Conservatives' disposition towards lower taxes. Either way, a Conservative Government could quickly become unpopular – especially if its policies mirror Margaret Thatcher from 1979 onwards when she raised taxes and more than doubled unemployment.

The quaint title of Chancellor of the Exchequer is interpreted by some as equivalent to Finance Minister. In reality he has the equivalent powers of the US Secretary of the Treasury, the Head of the OMB and the chairmen of the Congressional Appropriations Committees. Under Tony Blair, the then Chancellor Gordon Brown was in effect the COO of UK Inc.

The chancellor in waiting or Shadow Chancellor, is a privately educated, privately wealthy young man by the name of George Gideon Oliver Osborne, heir to the 17th baronet, hereditary knight; Sir Peter Osborne Bt. He spent a brief period at Davidson College, North Carolina in 1990. “Sir George” as he will be one day is starting to soften up the electorate for the particularly nasty fiscal medicine he might have in mind if the Conservatives form the Government next year. He talks of “this age of austerity”, “real government spending would have to be cut”, “improving the productivity of our public services” and always “reform” of public services.



The political phenomenon of summer 2009 was the return and rise of Peter Mandelson. He was one of the four architects of New Labour in the 1990's (along with former Prime Minister Tony Blair, current Prime Minister Gordon Brown and spin master Alistair Campbell). It is alleged that Tony Blair once said that his mission would be complete when the Labour Party came to love Peter Mandelson.

Peter Mandelson was one of the main people behind Labour's 1987 General Election Campaign. His maternal grandfather Her-



bert Morrison was Home Secretary in Winston Churchill's wartime coalition government and Deputy Prime Minister in Atlee's post was Government, becoming a life peer when he retired from Parliament. Mandelson became an MP in 1992 and a Cabinet Minister in 1997. He was forced to resign – twice – over scandals, and became the European Commissioner for Trade from 2004 to 2008. He built an international reputation leading the European team in world trade talks. By October 2008, Gordon Brown was in some difficulties with his party as Labour slumped in the opinion polls. He brought Mandelson back into Government as a member of the (appointed) House of Lords like his grandfather. Since then Mandelson's power and influence has soared to previously unachieved heights. He is now Deputy Prime Minister in all but name, and is widely credited with saving Gordon Brown's premiership earlier this year when it was rocked by a co-ordinated series of high level resignations.

So could Peter Mandelson persuade Gordon Brown to stand down at the last minute in order to save the New Labour project on which they have worked so long and hard; renounce his peerage; fight the General Election, and as the new face but with his huge experience beat David Cameron's Conservatives? It's the stuff of dreams, for sure and unlikely now. But as another former Labour Prime Minister once said “a week is a long time in politics”.

Which brings us back to the man who would be Prime Minister, Rt Hon David William Donald Cam-

eron MP, current leader of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition. He gained a first class degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford University after leaving the most prestigious of Britain's private schools, Eton, and was Special Advisor to the Conservative Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time Britain's currency crashed in 1992 (the infamous Black Wednesday which made George Soros both a household name and a billionaire). He has described himself as both a “compassionate Conservative”, “a big Thatcher fan” and “not a deeply ideological person”. Here was a Blair-a-like, and the Conservative Party was desperate to have one. He put together a coalition first of MP's and then of Conservative membership in the country to beat by two to one the son of a working class northern single mother who had hauled himself up to the top of the Conservative Party.

Does he have what it takes to put the Conservatives back in power for the first time in 13 years, tackle the country's problems and then not lose the General Election of 2014/2015?

Our current Prime Minister, Gordon Brown is the son of a preacher man. There's a stereotype of the dour Scottish son of the manse – and that's a fairly accurate portrait of him. Amongst his formative experiences were losing the sight in one eye in his teens – which gives him a sometimes odd look. He is serious at times when superficial is what is required by viewers and listeners. Under the influence of his wife, a former public relations consultant, he tries to smile more but usually ends up looking spooky. A private man, he refuses to use his children for campaigning either, and like David Cameron,



he has also lost a young child, both of them stating unequivocally that under the British National Health Service they couldn't have had finer care.

As an Iron Chancellor to Tony Blair, Gordon Brown built a reputation for grinding down or beating down opposition to his views within the Labour Party – he was often described as having “a great clunking fist”. Gordon is a party man through and through – which makes reaching out to others more difficult for him than it was for Tony Blair.

British General Elections are won on the centre ground. The main political parties are fairly wide coalitions, but you really need to steal the other guy's political clothing to succeed. The indications are that David Cameron can articulate the centrist view better – but one of his problems is that he is to the left of his party but Gordon Brown isn't to the right enough of his. It seems like a forlorn hope, but something might. Everybody but Prime Minister John Major thought he was going down to certain defeat in 1992, but he snatched a 30 seat majority at the last moment.

Harold MacMillan was Prime Minister in the time of President Kennedy. When asked what could change the course of politics, he's alleged to have said “events dear boy, events”. Political squalls often come out of the clear blue sky – and sometimes presage a hurricane. One example from a couple of months ago was a Conservative Member of the European Parliament appearing on American television with his opinions on the UK National Health Service. He was quoted as saying that it was expensive with poor outcomes. But the National Health Service is a touchstone issue in British politics.

Despite what might have been said during the US debate on healthcare, Britain pays about half the proportion of its national income for health care as America does, with similar outcomes. But the service is available to all, free at the point of need. Universally, people treated by the National Health Service are enthusiastic about it and would defend it to the bitter end. Its foundation in 1947 removed the fear of falling ill from a large proportion of the population. Health is for the Conservatives what national defence was for Labour 15 years ago – it won't win you votes, but can sure lose you a lot. The August outburst may yet come back to damage the Conservatives badly, especially as despite Cameron's spinning it does seem to represent the views of a body of Conservatives.

If economic optimism returns generally, it could well benefit Gordon Brown by half way through next year. He will be able to claim plausibly that Britain's problems were part of a global phenomenon, and that his willingness to tear up the old rule book, slashing interest rates, and pumping cash into the economy, got Britain through. He could say that if the Conservatives get in, they'll ruin it by raising taxes (no doubt a “secret plan” will be claimed) and by cutting public services to the detriment of the poorer voters. With turnouts at a General Election of 75-80% in Britain, this can often be blown up to be a vote loser by good spin doctors – and Lord Mandelson is considered to be the Prince of such dark arts, a veritable latter day Machiavelli.

So there you have it. In the blue corner “Kid” Cameron and his friend “Sir George” Osborne, the silver-spooned pugilists. In the red corner the tag team of “Clunking Fist” Brown and “Mandy” Mandelson – friends, blood brothers or needle sharing junkies? Who will win the forthcoming slug fest?