

# Blackpool

The Tories meet to select Labour's next victim.

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

*Blackpool*

TWO WEEKS AGO, Brighton for the annual conference of Tony Blair's Labour party. Last week, Blackpool for the conference of a Conservative party desperately seeking a leader and policies to cope with Blair and his likely successor, Gordon Brown. Brighton is a rather genteel, middle class, channelside city, home to many retirees; Blackpool is a gritty, seaside resort catering to working class Brits, 11 million of whom brave the often-nasty weather to avail themselves of the cheap hotels, entertainments (bingo parlors open at noon, lines form at 11 A.M.), down-market bars, and concessions on its famous Pleasure Beach. Blackpool, one reporter said, is the only town he has been in that has two pawn shops on one street.

I mention this not to mock those who find pleasure in Blackpool's offerings. Rather, it is to point out that this town—in which average earnings are about 25 percent below the national average, the lifespan some three years shorter than in Britain as a whole, and 13 percent of the working-age population is on disability—once welcomed the conferences of Labour, too. But a few years ago, New Labour, now more the party of a Blair-like professional class than of horny-handed toilers in mines and mills, decided that Blackpool was too, er, shabby for its newly elevated tastes, and moved on to posher towns such as Bournemouth and Brighton and, next year, thriving Manchester. The Tories, meanwhile, ever fearful of

being identified as the party of the rich—a former leader last week exhorted them to abandon their representation of society's "fat cats"—feel they must stick it out in Blackpool, a town that most of their leaders would never consider visiting except under the compulsion of a conference.

The only thing the Tories and Blackpool have in common is decline. The Conservative party has seen its vote total sink from 14 million in 1992 to 9 million earlier this year. This decline is particularly galling to a party that once was the mightiest electoral machine in the Western world—"the natural party of government" as it came to be regarded both by supporters and opponents. So its members arrived in Blackpool determined to reverse its post-Thatcher decline. No easy chore.

For one thing, it was the Tory members of parliament who assassinated Margaret Thatcher when they deemed her usefulness to them to be at end. Since then, the assassins have turned on each other and waged war on a succession of their own leaders with a singlemindedness that left little energy for fighting Labour.

For another, the Tories have never agreed on a policy towards Europe. One faction supports deeper integration and greater power for the Brussels bureaucracy, and backed Blair's unsuccessful drive to abandon the pound in favor of the euro. Ken Clarke, one of the candidates for the Tory leadership, is trying to make members forget his ardent support of the euro and the entire European "project."

Opposing the Tory europhiles, we have the Tory euroskeptics, eager to recapture some of the powers ceded to the E.U. by Blair. Clearly in the

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majority, this faction now more than ever feels it has got it right: Europe's Human Rights Act, which they would never have allowed Britain to adopt, is tying Blair's hands as he attempts to crack down on terrorism. It seems that the act allows Britain's judges to prevent him from deporting terrorists if their country of origin might treat them roughly on their return. The darling of the euroskeptics is Liam Fox, a Conservative's conservative who supports U.S. foreign policy, most particularly the war in Iraq.

The party is also racked by unremitting warfare between its "modernizers" and its "right wing." The former want to make the Conservative party more attractive to single moms, gays, ethnic minorities, and urban voters. The largely rural, heavily female "blue-rinse set" that has historically been the backbone of the party does not exactly find these modernizers understandable, much less congenial. They speak the language of "family values," oppose political correctness, see law and order as a top priority, and want to give teachers greater disciplinary powers.

Finally, the Tory party has had trouble making up its mind about America. The *Times* (of London) reported, "The revival of the 'Little Englander' branch of the Tories, imbued with a dark anti-Americanism inspired by cultural snobbery, has been one of the most disturbing events of the past Parliament."

Cultural snobbery is not the worst obstacle for Americans eager to retain the historic relationship with our most reliable ally. It is opposition by leading Tories to American foreign policy. Last month, in Brighton, Tony Blair told his party that Britain's future lies in continuing its special relationship with the United States. Last week in Blackpool, Clarke, an old Tory warhorse who is violently opposed to the war in Iraq, was running strong, a tribute to the ability of his earthy, cigar-smoking, beer-swilling habits and his position on Iraq to overcome his history of euophilia. Joining him in the anti-American,

antiwar camp was a dark-horse contender and former defense minister, Malcolm Rifkind, a self-styled "One Nation Tory" who believes that the "special relationship" is a fiction created by America to control British foreign policy. He would not travel down what he sees as that one-way street.

These leadership candidates are not the only important Tories who would distance their country from Washington. Boris Johnson, a Tory MP who also edits the *Spectator*, and who was described to me as the darling of the upper-income trendier set, used a newspaper column to label "George Dubya Bush" the "cross-

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eyed Texan warmonger," and took to the pages of the left-wing *New Statesman* to declare, "If I were an Iranian politician, I am afraid I would regard it as my patriotic duty to equip my country, as fast as possible, with a nuclear deterrent against Israel and the Pentagon."

And Alan Duncan, the party's spokesman on transportation policy, regaled the audience with his recollection of a pleasurable stay at Harvard some 25 years ago, when a man he identifies in his printed text as "Zbig Breshynski" told a Kennedy School audience, "The United States will never have a grown-up foreign policy until it learns to lose its obsession with Cuba." It would be a mistake, said Duncan, to "sacrifice the dignity and confidence of Britain by thinking that all our foreign policy needs to be is an off-the-shelf replica of America's."

Don't let the anti-Americanism upset you, advised a sympathetic MP. "Only about one-third of the party hates America." The other two-thirds just oppose U.S. foreign policy and the president. Nothing personal, and Disney World is a great place to take the kids.

Of course, the Tory party is so far from being electable that its anti-Americanism is more a painful reminder of the great days of the Thatcher-Reagan love-in than a significant threat to the alliance. Even the Tory leadership privately concedes that it has little chance to return to power when it faces Blair's almost-certain successor, Gordon Brown, probably in 2009. Indeed, one very pro-American former leader told me at a private luncheon that he wonders whether his party will even exist after the drubbing it will probably take at that time.

That may be unduly pessimistic. The Tories are trying to decide just what it means to be a conservative party, circa 2005. Those who looked to the U.S. model have been shaken by the fall in Bush's popularity, which they take to mean that conservatism is in decline. What they see as the fiscal mess in America has made this party of smaller government even more reluctant to advocate tax cuts, a policy they have always feared would open them to the charge that they plan to gut the health service in order to fund tax cuts for the rich.

I attended what is known as a tax-policy "fringe meeting," a sort of public seminar in which party notables debate policy issues and then take questions from the always-lively audiences. One speaker said that if elected, "we will not realistically be able to cut taxes"; another—the party's shadow Minister for Young People (I kid you not)—hopes supply-side reforms will make tax cuts possible, "but not right now"; still another ruled out tax cuts for "five-to-ten years" after the party returns to power. Not for these conservatives the Irving Kristol

admonition: policy first, bookkeeping later.

A notable exception was one contender for the leadership, the very-young-by-the-standards-of-the-Tory-party David Cameron (39 years old). In a speech that had more than a little hint of Ronald Reagan's "morning in America," he proposed that economic growth would create a larger pie, and that the increment could be shared between tax cuts and increased social spending. Separately, he supported the overthrow of Saddam and staying in Iraq until we get the job done.

Cameron is one of a group of younger members who are trying to do the hard work that they saw the conservative think tanks and small magazines of America do as a predicate to the election of Ronald Reagan and the onset of the conservative and neoconservative eras in America. They are studying a flat (well, flatter) tax; trying to figure out how to oppose the expansion of the state in a country in which voters are more risk-averse than Americans; seeking programs that will encourage entrepreneurship in a country more inclined to prefer egalitarianism and queuing than meritocracy and reliance on the market to allocate resources; and wondering how to parry a prime minister who has stolen the middle ground by melding calls for social justice with promises of reforms that would give consumers freedom to choose their kids' schools and their own health care facilities.

Many of these young MPs, some in the Cameron camp, some not, are ardent Atlanticists, and flit back and forth between think tanks in Washington and think tanks in London. They support U.S. policy in Iraq, attribute much of their party's anti-Bushism to snobbery, especially by that segment of their party that can't abide George W. Bush's inability to reach the rhetorical heights of, well, of the successive leaders of the Tory party who have managed with great eloquence to lead it into the electoral wilderness for going on a decade.

In Cameron's case, his willingness to study the U.S. model is uncon-

cealed—he styles himself a compassionate conservative. He is determined to remove regulations that stifle economic growth, to rely more on private-sector "social entrepreneurs . . . whose solutions are working where the state is failing," and to attract younger people to the Tory banner without surrendering his belief that "marriage . . . [is] a great institution," and that the family is best able to provide the "stable, loving home" that children need.

It is a testimonial to the flexibility of politicians that after Cameron's speech roused the delegates and converted him from a longshot into a real contender, Duncan jumped from the bandwagon of his sinking favorite, David Davis, onto Cameron's. Strange that, since Duncan had one day earlier managed to work this gem into his speech: "The march of Christian fundamentalism may suit the politics of America, but it does not suit the politics of Britain, and we are not going to solve our party's plight by thinking we can just import it like that from the United States."

So all is not grim for Americans who remember the Tory party of Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. The complicated selection process—the two candidates who get the most votes from their parliamentary colleagues then go before the 300,000 party members, who select the winner—might very well produce a candidate who is not viscerally anti-American, of which there are three: Cameron, Fox, and the sinking frontrunner, David Davis. But should the party decide that Ken Clarke or (less likely) Malcolm Rifkind is to be their leader, Tory support for Blair's policy of sticking with America in Iraq will be gone. That support has thus far enabled Blair to hold off the left of his own party, and keep British troops in Iraq. Remove it, and the pressure on the prime minister to declare victory and bring the troops home may well become irresistible. The outcome of this battle for the leadership of a long-out-of-power political party is of more than a little importance to America. ♦