

# Who is David Cameron?

What the Conservatives' bright new hope can learn from Gordon Brown



**T**HE new Conservative leader, David Cameron, goes to his first conference with the best ratings his party has had for 20 years. Most polls say that his lead will widen if, as seems likely, Gordon Brown, the chancellor, takes over from

Tony Blair as Labour leader. Even on issues on which Labour has traditionally been strong, such as health and education, the Conservatives are now ahead, despite the fact that Mr Cameron has no discernible policies on either.

This must be gratifying for him, for it vindicates the strategy he set out when running for the leadership a year ago. Voters, he argued, were so hostile to the party that they disliked and disbelieved anything it proposed. Unless people could be persuaded that the Tories were decent and well-meaning, they would continue to regard the party with a deadly mixture of indifference and contempt.

## Cuddly conservatism

Mr Cameron has tried to change voters' attitudes by taking swipes at carefully chosen targets. The Conservatives are seen as too close to business? Attack shops selling provocative clothes for children and call for corporate social responsibility. Self-interested? Go to the North Pole and fret about global warming, preferably in the company of a furry animal. Too authoritarian? Suggest that louts need love and understanding. Stick to warm slogans such as "trusting people" and "modern compassionate conservatism", and hope that the electorate's growing disillusionment with a fractious government that has been in power for nearly a decade would do the rest. Intellectually vacuous, perhaps; but also politically successful.

However, transforming the Tory image from selfish and mean to cuddly and green is not enough. Successful oppositions do not just wait for governments to collapse. They accelerate the process by showing that they are ready to take over. Mr Blair did this when he won the Labour leadership in 1994, and the contrast between him and the exhausted Tories created the conditions for Labour's landslide in 1997. This does not mean Mr Cameron should set out now precisely how much a Tory government would tax and spend in 2010, or provide a detailed blueprint of how it would run the health service. What he must do, though, is define a clear philosophy and identity that will give voters a sense of what they are voting for and help shape Conservative policies. He also has to persuade voters that he leads a confident and united party.

And he should move soon. By next summer, Labour will have a new leader. Until then, the government will be drifting and wrapped up in its own affairs. Mr Blair will have little authority and Mr Brown will have to wait as patiently as he can before attempting the difficult task of renewal in office. Mr Cameron, meanwhile, can use his husky-hugging popularity to get his way against opponents within his party. This opportunity will not last long. Mr Cameron's moment is now.

He needs to do three things. First, he must sketch out his

ideas about what government should and should not do. Like most Tories, he seems to believe instinctively in a smaller state; but since public finances will be tight for the next three years, pledging tax cuts would be unrealistic. However, a Conservative Party that is content with public spending running at 42% of GDP is not doing its job. Mr Cameron should make it clear that his long-term aim is to see government intrude less in people's lives and take less out of their pay packets.

One way to make the state do less is to hand the job of delivering more public services to providers from the private and voluntary sectors. Mr Blair has tried to occupy this ground, but since Mr Brown seems less comfortable on it, Mr Cameron should try to make it his own. There is no reason why this approach should look conventionally right-wing. Mr Cameron should explain that such changes would give choice and power to people who currently have very little of either. Mr Blair, of course, has done that over and over again; but so what? As Labour's espousal of market economics has shown, stealing the other party's clothes can be a successful strategy.

Second, Mr Cameron needs to follow up on his intention of making his party, once a club of (near-) dead white males, look as though it represents modern Britain. That means pushing through organisational changes and tightening his grip on how the party chooses its parliamentary candidates.

Third, he should use the limited opportunities that the leader of the opposition has to dabble in foreign affairs to appear more statesmanlike than he has so far. He has already had to postpone his plan to pull out of the centre-right European People's Party in Brussels. This pledge might have seemed a good tactic to win the affections of the party's Eurosceptics. But he has found it impossible to deliver, and his dithering has irritated those he was trying to please almost as much as those who thought it a bad idea to start with. Mr Cameron should ditch his pledge altogether and acknowledge that the best way to exercise influence in Europe is from within its biggest political group, rather than from the fringes.

## Opposites detract

He needs to counter the perception on the other side of the Atlantic that he is anti-American. The fifth anniversary of September 11th was the wrong moment to make a speech criticising Mr Blair's close relationship with the White House. Even though Mr Cameron spent part of the speech attacking anti-Americanism, he appeared to be trying to profit from Mr Blair's unpopular stance. An uncomfortable sense that he was moving in the wrong direction may be one reason why he has persuaded John McCain, a Republican front-runner for the American presidency, to address next week's conference.

If Gordon Brown and David Cameron face each other as party leaders, it will be a curious match, for they are, at present, opposites. Mr Brown is all substance and, sadly for his polling figures, no style. Mr Cameron is, so far, all style and not enough substance. If he can acquire a little of the dour Scotsman's intellectual seriousness, he will be a real contender at the next election. And that, for Britain, would be great: competition, as this paper occasionally points out, is a fine thing. ■