

A modern political party needs to be mean, lean and hungry

I AM A businessman, not a politician, but 20 years in the company of politicians has taught me to recognise the imperatives of realpolitik. I know only too well that Iain Duncan Smith will have to pull more than a few punches in order to rebuild consensus within the Conservative Party.

Because of this, and because I am for the time being relieved of the constraints which come with the job of Treasurer, I want to draw attention to a number of weaknesses within the party which must be addressed, but which the new leader may find too awkward to tackle without support.

I offer this as a contribution to a wider debate, and in the hope that those of us who care about the party will give Iain the help he needs to transform the Conservatives into a modern, efficient and effective political party – a party equipped to win.

The successful political party of the 21st century has to be very much like the successful 21st-century corporation – mean, lean and hungry. It has to be a party focused to an equal degree on campaigning and on fund-raising. It has, of course, to be answerable to its members, but the organisation and structure of the party and its lines of communication have to be simple and direct, and authority and control have to be unambiguous, single-minded and harmonious.

Have I described the current Conservative Party? Sadly, I have not. Hungry we may be, but lean and mean we are not. History has bequeathed us a structure of 650 constituency associations reflecting an exclusive preoccupation with Westminster, when we have other crucial elections to fight and win too.



MICHAEL
ASHCROFT

*'The world has changed,
and we must change too if
we are to stand any chance
of returning to power'*

Each of these constituency associations is a legally autonomous body that deals directly with the centre. This places an unreasonable and largely avoidable load on Central Office, with few obvious benefits.

There will be those who argue that direct contact is the most effective means of communication, but in this case the numbers are unmanageable. From my experience in business, I know that reporting lines need to be uncluttered. Sadly, ours are not.

The party has to find a way to streamline its affairs through the in-

roduction of a representative regional structure. It must do this soon. And more day-to-day authority should be vested in those who are expected to run the party and win elections.

We also need to apply our resources to best effect; but the fortunes of the constituencies differ widely. Some are wealthy. Most are not. Ironically, those with the greatest assets are often those whose membership lists are in decline. And it has proven consistently difficult to deploy the resources of the safest and wealthiest seats to help to fight the marginal seats which we have to win if we are to return to power.

Nowhere is this dichotomy better illustrated than in the distribution of agents – the people whose professional responsibility it is to get Conservative candidates elected to office. Most commercial organisations would make sure that their salesforce was positioned where sales are most needed. In contrast, nearly all of our agents are located in the safest seats.

We also need to establish our priorities, and define our battlefields – nationally, regionally and locally. Whether the elections are for seats in Westminster, the Welsh Assembly or Warrington Borough Council, we need a strategy, resources and management. It need not be the same combination in every case but, irrespective of the situation, they should be co-ordinated and they have to be prioritised.

One of the most troubling features

The Independent

Wednesday, October 10th 2001



David Davis has the key post of Conservative Party chairman

Stefan Rousseau

of recent years has been the success of the Liberal Democrats in making inroads into constituencies such as Guildford and Romsey. That a party which is arguably to the left of New Labour should be able to make incursions into our home ground raises troubling questions. I believe that the Conservative party must take a fresh look at the manner in which our candidates are selected, especially in crucial seats.

There will be some who resist pressure for reform, and especially for greater control from the centre. But the world has changed, and we must change too if we are to stand any chance of returning to power. The success of membership recruitment at the centre - which from a standing start two years ago now represents 10 per cent of our membership - stands in marked contrast to the steady decline of membership at constituency level.

The modern political party needs to

be able to talk to its members quickly and efficiently, and it needs to be able to mobilise them. Communications within the current structure mirror the lines of authority and command. They are slow, cumbersome and inefficient.

I stand down as Treasurer at the time of the party conference. When I first took on the job I discovered to my horror that the party was on the brink of financial collapse. We are no longer in that position, and I hope that the contribution of my team has been to place the fortunes of the party on foundations from which the structural reforms that I am certain are vital to our future success can be contemplated.

Despite my frustrations with the current structure, I have been hugely impressed by many of the people on whom the party is able to call. The leadership contest has served to focus attention on a very small number of people, but the new leader can look for-

ward to the support of a legion of committed volunteers and donors.

People are central to the fortunes of any enterprise, and a political party is no exception. Two jobs are of particular importance, those of chairman and chief executive. These are the people who will take the lead in bringing about structural change, and they need to be comfortable with reform, and have the commitment and the wherewithal to see that it happens. This is crucial.

I can think of few people better equipped to fill the chairman's seat than David Davis, and I hope in due course a chief executive is appointed with skills to match.

I know better than anyone that some of the reforms I propose will not be welcomed universally, but the nettle must be grasped, and soon.

Lord Ashcroft has been Treasurer of the Conservative Party since 1998