

Once more unto the breach, by Helen Disney

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The colours of the next government will reveal themselves this conference season. The Conservatives might be ahead in the polls, but there is a battle still to come

The personal has always been political and this year's round of party conferences turns out to be no exception. In between questions about the prime minister's state of health and counter attacks about the Conservative leader's privileged background, we are now truly into the politics of the playground. It seems the next election will be fought as much on personalities and presentation as it is on policies.

Labour's conference has been typical of a party that knows its time in office is probably coming to an end. Aside from empty seats on the conference floor and trouble selling commercial stands, all the talk is of when and how Gordon Brown will go, rather than if he will go. Losing power is a messy business for any party as a host of new contenders battle behind the scenes to step into the dead man's shoes.

Next week's Conservative conference, on the other hand, promises to be an upbeat affair. Lobbyists, pressure groups, think-tanks, the media – all eyes are now on David Cameron's party as it appears to be the government in waiting. Aside from the grandstanding speeches and media gossip, much of the real business of conference will happen, as ever, on the sidelines.

Fringe meetings, dinners and private briefings with shadow ministers will all help to shape the manifesto and the ideas that will take centre stage during the election campaign.

But, in spite of the manoeuvres of spin doctors dominating the headlines, voters are more interested in what a new government would do about the economy, improving financial regulation, and dealing with public service reform than they are about the personal backgrounds of the party leaders.

The spectre of Tory cuts, which is being employed by Labour, indeed has a resonance for some voters who are worried that the Conservatives will use the economic crisis as a ready excuse to 'slash and burn' public services.

But, in reality, whoever wins the next election will have the unenviable job of making substantial cuts to the public sector. According to the Pre-Budget Report and Budget, fiscal tightening will begin next year and mount gradually over eight years to 6.4% of national income or around £90bn a year in today's terms from 2017/18 onwards.

George Osborne, the Conservative shadow chancellor, argues that the process should be quicker, starting from next year. But he has not said yet what he thinks the overall size of cuts or the timescale should be.

Vince Cable, the Liberal Democrat Treasury spokesman, argues that the government has understated the problem and that the tightening should reach 8% of national income (£112bn per year) after five years – although he is more wary than Osborne of cutting more sharply next year when the economic recovery is only just taking hold.

With voters already concerned about the state of the NHS, the shortage of primary school places and crime and antisocial behaviour, the next prime minister is certainly going to have his (or her) hands full.

Party conferences are this year about setting out stalls and building voters' trust – or, in the case of New Labour, rebuilding it. Gordon Brown might start to be in a stronger position politically if we do indeed come out of recession towards the end of this year. He can then argue that he was responsible for the recovery and for steering the country through difficult times.

The question for him will be whether this is enough or whether voters will still continue to associate him with the crisis.

For David Cameron, the challenge is different. Under his leadership, the Tories have become 'likeable' again. They show a strong lead in the polls and are now associated with a range of different issues, including the environment and health care, rather than being dogged by association only with tax cuts and Europe.

However, are voters so disillusioned that they will reject both main parties and instead support the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the UK Independence Party or even the British National Party? The possibility of a hung Parliament is still being discussed and the Tories have no room for complacency.

Party conference season marks the point at which battle formally commences – and to the victor the spoils.

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