

Public Finance

THE BUSINESS WEEKLY OF THE PUBLIC SECTOR ● JUNE 23–29 2006 ● £2.95



Since the summer exam season is now upon us, there seems no better time to pose a few questions on the state of UK politics today.

So, what do the following statements have in common? New Labour is guaranteed to lose the next general election. Gordon Brown will be the unopposed successor to Tony Blair. David Cameron is making the Conservative party 'cool' and looks set to revive their electoral fortunes.

Answer: they have all become part of the common parlance of media debate, accepted as truisms not just by journalists but by members of the Labour and Conservative parties, too.

At a conference last weekend organised by the Compass pressure group, Treasury minister Ed Balls, a former aide to Gordon Brown who remains close to the chancellor, told the audience that it was getting 'more difficult' to govern.

Labour Party chair Hazel Blears also warned her audience against complacency, saying David Cameron was proving 'attractive' to many voters.

But do voters really share these views deep down? Yes, trust in the government has certainly been damaged, be it by Iraq, recent

ministerial scandals or the failure to reform public services fast enough to meet the public's expectations. Yes, superficially, Gordon Brown looks like the only obvious successor to Blair.

And, yes, the Conservatives are finally making a comeback, at least as far as recent polls are concerned.

But are things really as bad as all that for New Labour? And, if not, what does that mean for the Tories, given that governments are generally said to lose elections rather than oppositions win them.

If we compare the dying years of the Major administration to how Tony Blair is viewed now, it is hard to see quite the same visceral hatred of John Reid, Patricia Hewitt or even John Prescott as was felt by many for the Tory stalwarts of the time.

If an election were to be called tomorrow, would the mood of the country actually be the same as it was on the eve of May 1997 with voters turning out in their droves to get the government out?

Certainly the recent spate of ministerial misdemeanours seem reminiscent of the sleazy feel of the early 1990s.

Right now, the government is

indeed as unpopular as John Major's was at this stage between the 1992–1997 Parliaments.

And the Conservatives are as popular as the Labour opposition was then, too.

But the real test is what happens next. Even if you believe Labour won't recover much beyond the low 30s in terms of vote share, for the Conservatives to win the next election they would need to break through 40% – and not only stay there but go to 45% or even 50%.

Aside from a few snide remarks, the media has largely eulogised caring David Cameron, the family man who cycles to work, has a disabled child, is profiled wearing jeans and trainers in celebrity magazines and is even prepared to criticise big business.

And while the feelgood factor is definitely present – alongside some interesting new noises on policy – there is still a long way to go before the next general election.

There is plenty of time left to test Cameron's ability to sustain public interest and stave off a damaging public row with hardline Right-wingers.

Much depends too, of course, on when and whether Tony Blair steps

If we compare the dying years of the Major administration to how Tony Blair is viewed now, it is hard to see the same visceral hatred as was felt for Tory stalwarts of the time

down and hands over the reins to his chancellor. Blair versus Cameron is quite a different fight from Brown versus Cameron.

Despite what many on the Labour Left believe, the public's view of Brown is less clear. Many do not really understand what he would stand for, other than not being Tony Blair.

And, as personality is so key to modern politics, it is harder to see the appeal of the dour Scotsman competing with the cuddly charm of Cameron.

This autumn's party conferences will provide an acid test of the prevailing mood. Brownites are already pressing for Blair to announce his departure there, while the Tories will be working flat out to demonstrate their new, modern credentials (keep an eye out for the funkier stage set yet).

But my bet is that we have a boring summer – and probably longer – ahead of us with business going on as usual, punctuated only by the usual stories about where politicians have gone on holiday and what it says about their electoral prospects.

One thing's for sure, though, I bet none of them will be seen playing croquet.

● **Helen Disney** is director of the Stockholm Network, a network of European think-tanks