

Another long summer in politics

Last Wednesday, MPs left Westminster for the start of the parliamentary recess. The break will last for 82 days, including 57 working days. This is one reason the current parliamentary session is one of the shortest for nearly three decades.



For politicians from all parties the summer recess did not come soon enough. Such breaks always provide MPs with much-needed opportunities to spend time and rebuild links with constituents. But there are some

added features this year. Most importantly, when parliament finally returns on 12 October, there will only be around 200 days left before the prime minister must call a general election.

This year, the expenses scandal has cast a cloud over all politicians, even those innocent of any wrongdoing. Several have been quick to write on their blogs that this long recess is no long holiday and these claims are sure to be followed by website updates or tweets about their constituency activities. Still, MPs will not be able to forget all about the uncomfortable events of the last few months. They have been instructed by parliamentary authorities to keep checking their emails. Sir Thomas Legg's independent audit of expenses will go on throughout the summer, meaning that some MPs may find a few nasty surprises in their inboxes.

They may have more to worry about. A new online campaign group called 38 Degrees, which says it is dedicated to "deepening democracy in the UK", is asking the public to send in reports of MPs "at work and at play" during recess for its MP Holiday Watch. Last Friday, the *Daily Telegraph* sent a survey to all MPs asking about their holiday plans. Politicians remain "easy targets" this summer and could face further calls for improved transparency about all aspects of their working life. An uneasy summer for parliamentarians lies ahead; they will be anxious not to be caught slacking.

Labour MPs will have most on their minds this summer. On current polling trends, at least 100 of them will be out of a job after the next general election and, while many are fatalistic about what is coming, they need all the time with the voters they can get. Last Thursday, the government suffered another major blow when the Conservatives won the Norwich North by-election with a 16.5 per cent swing. The result indicated that David Cameron is well on course to enter Downing Street next year. On Tuesday's *Newsnight* even Lord Mandelson called Labour "the underdogs in politics now".

This year, the prime minister, Gordon Brown has decided to take a four week break in the Lake District. This does not mean, however, that he expects the government to stop work. He and his advisers are trying to use the recess to show that Labour still has a plan for the future, that the government has not run out of steam. Despite being on holiday Mr Brown has issued two press statements in the past week, one of which was reassuringly titled "I'm fighting for you". This week, the government has also made several big policy announcements, including the £150 million of aid to the manufacturing sector and the launch of the £1 billion scheme to create more jobs for the unemployed. There will be more announcements throughout the summer. Some big policy announcements will come in September.

Yet the prime minister will also need to deliver a clearer vision for the country if he is to mount a successful fightback. He will have big opportunity to do so at the Labour Party conference

July 31

in September and Gordon Brown will, once again, need to make the speech of his life. This time, the PM must convince his gloomy party that he has a plan to stave off disaster. Even if he succeeds with the Labour Party, the public seems to largely have stopped listening to Gordon Brown and his announcements. For instance, last month's draft legislative programme published as part of the policy overview document *Building Britain's Future*, was heralded by the government as a "strategic plan to invest in Britain's economic and industrial future", but had little or no impact on voters.

Interestingly, the summer announcements are being spearheaded by Lord Mandelson (pictured). By taking a back seat over summer, Gordon Brown is allowing the first secretary to take centre stage leaving Labour's deputy leader, Harriet Harman looking only nominally in charge of the government. Lord Mandelson will not be going on holiday. He appreciates that the electorate wants Gordon Brown to go. Lord Mandelson also knows that voters continue to have some nagging doubts about David Cameron's Conservatives and what they actually stand for. Lord Mandelson has a hard task this recess to convince voters to give Labour another chance, but he knows the summer presents a major opportunity to undermine the Conservatives. He will need to ensure though that his efforts are not drowned out by questions about his own personal agenda.



The opposition parties will also try to use the summer recess to gain political ground. The Conservative leader, David Cameron could hardly have received a better present at the start of the recess than the result at Norwich North. If the swing the Conservatives achieved was repeated at a general election, they would win an overall Commons majority of over 150 seats.

Yet the Conservative leader still has much to think about on his family holiday in France next week. For all the talk of victory at the next election, Mr Cameron knows that his party still faces an uphill task. As he pointed out in an interview with Absolute Radio on Wednesday, "Margaret Thatcher had to win 40 seats to get a majority, just to win. We need to win 120 seats. Everything has got to go right".

Part of this is, of course, David Cameron guarding against any hint of complacency. The risk that colleagues will take victory for granted has become something of an obsession for the Conservative leader and his closest advisers. It is also grounded in reality. The Conservatives need a swing of over 6 per cent to win a majority of one. This is more than Margaret Thatcher achieved in 1979 in what was then a post-war record.

David Cameron also knows that while the prime minister might look as if he is on the ropes, he is far from out for the count. The only certain thing in politics is uncertainty. Almost anything could happen between now and polling day. David Cameron and his team are also acutely aware that their current poll lead is as much down to hostility towards the government as it is warmth towards the Conservative Party. Whilst the Conservatives won an impressive victory in Norwich North, their share of the total number of people qualified to vote was actually down on 2005. The Conservatives' margin of victory was magnified by a huge fall in turnout among Labour voters.

So David Cameron and his strategists will spend the summer charting a final offensive to take them through to polling day. Opinion polls show that many voters, even those predisposed to vote Conservative, have little idea what the party stands for. The top priority, therefore, will be

July 31

to start pulling together a coherent Conservative narrative, to form the basis of the election campaign itself. Central to this process is Oliver Letwin, who is currently ensuring that a manifesto is prepared in the unlikely event of a snap general election. The final word on the content of the election manifesto, however, rests firmly with Mr Cameron and his shadow chancellor, George Osborne.



Individual members of the shadow cabinet will also be busy over the summer and there will be a number of themed weeks on issues such as crime, health and education. Each member has also been asked to prepare a plan setting out their top priorities for the first term of a Cameron government; how they intend to achieve them; and how progress will be tracked. This is being carried out in conjunction with the Implementation Unit at Conservative HQ, headed by the shadow minister for the cabinet office, Francis Maude.

The shadow cabinet will try to use the summer to realise Mr Cameron's pledge to reform and reduce the numbers of so-called quangos under a Conservative government. Each member of the shadow cabinet will spend August examining the quangos that fall within their areas of responsibility before making recommendations about what to do about them.

All of this activity is intended to lead up to a party conference in October at which David Cameron can credibly present his team as a government in waiting with a Conservative message that gives the electorate positive reasons to vote for them. There are, however, dangers. Mr Cameron is still cautious about revealing too much of his hand in advance of the election campaign itself. He also knows that a Conservative government will have to administer tough medicine, including the possibility, like Mrs Thatcher before him, of raising some taxes. This could prove unpopular with his detractors on the Conservative right.

That said, Mr Cameron enters the final summer recess in poll position, and much better placed than the last Conservative leader of the opposition to take the party to victory at an election - Margaret Thatcher.

The Liberal Democrats will, once again, try to use the summer recess and their conference to gain more media attention. Having built up his profile in recent months, Nick Clegg started the break in a much better place than he was this time last year. Over the summer, the Liberal Democrats will seek to build upon his recent successes and focus attention on the three themes set out in their newly-released "pre-manifesto", *Fresh Start for Britain*. These are: "creating a sustainable economy"; "building a fair society"; and "cleaning up politics". During the recess, they will launch new policy papers on the natural environment, women (due next week), globalisation and consumer affairs. All of these will be debated at the party conference in Bournemouth at the end of September.

Last year, the Liberal Democrats' conference received little media coverage, as attention was focused firmly on the global financial crisis and Labour's internal fighting. This year, the party will make a concerted drive for media coverage of the key note speeches from Nick Clegg and the shadow chancellor, Vince Cable, which will again focus on the three "fresh start" themes. Mr Clegg will try to ensure that his new tougher message on spending will be clearly heard by the voters.

Conference representatives will also receive a 20 page document summarising the party's key policies, another part of the "fresh start". They will be asked to agree that the party will commit to no overall increase in public spending and that any new spending pledges will have to be paid for with cuts elsewhere. There is a lot of disagreement within the party over which policies should be "in" and "out" of the final manifesto and these arguments will be well-rehearsed at the conference. Afterwards, Nick Clegg and his team will have to enter the final

July 31

phase of assembling what they hope will be a fiscally neutral manifesto. All of that will be not be an easy task.

There is a lot to play for during recess, for all the main political parties. Lord Mandelson will be looking to exploit voters' doubts about David Cameron, but faces an uphill struggle to steer Labour away from almost certain electoral defeat next year. David Cameron and the Conservatives will try to give voters positive reasons to vote for their party, rather than benefiting purely from Labour's deep unpopularity. The Liberal Democrats will try hard to be noticed - and to be recognised as more fiscally responsible than they may have seemed in the past. We will only know how successful they have all been once the party conferences have taken place and the opinion polls start to come in.