

## Taking nothing for granted

In just over a week, Parliament will start its long summer recess. For most MPs, from all parties, it cannot come soon enough. The expenses scandals over the past two months have left MPs feeling battered and bruised; rarely have they been held in lower esteem by the public. The mood among MPs remains one of unremitting gloom combined with a slow realisation that there is a mountain to climb if they are to regain the public's trust.



Despite some lingering speculation about a possible autumn election it now seems fairly certain that - barring the most unforeseen events - Gordon Brown will go to the polls at some point next spring. He will be hoping that a successful and united party conference in September; a calmer few months going into the New Year; and signs that the economy is starting to grow again will help him to recover the political initiative.

All of this remains, however, a tall order. Following their drubbing in the local and European elections, Labour's opinion poll ratings are stuck in the low to mid-20s. On 23 July, two days after parliament rises, a by-election will be held in Norwich North. This is the constituency vacated by Ian Gibson, a Labour MP who fell victim to the expenses scandal and a swing of just under 6 per cent would hand the seat to the Conservatives. David Cameron and his team should be confident. At last year's Crewe and Nantwich by-election, the swing to the Conservatives was 17.6 per cent.

Those who assume that the Conservatives will easily win the next general election forget the scale of David Cameron's task. The Conservatives need to gain 116 seats with a uniform national swing of just over 6 per cent. If they gain Norwich North - a seat that the Conservatives held for most of their last spell in government - it would indicate that David Cameron is on course to enter Downing Street next year. Should Labour manage to hold the seat, then a hung parliament once more becomes a real possibility. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Conservatives are throwing everything at the constituency.

For David Cameron, a win in Norwich North would be just the fillip he and his party need. Despite the Conservatives' successes at the European and local elections, Mr Cameron has had a testing couple of months. The expenses scandal deprived him of one of his closest, and politically wisest, aides in Andrew MacKay. Mr MacKay was forced to quit as David Cameron's senior parliamentary and political adviser and will step down from the Commons at the general election. In the wake of the scandal, there is undoubted discontent amongst Conservative MPs over the way in which some colleagues were perceived to have been hung out to dry by the leadership. By all accounts, morale remains extremely low.

According to some reports, David Cameron has recognised the need to pay extra attention to shadow ministers and backbenchers who feel excluded from decision making, even in their own areas of policy. For hundreds of years, all parties have heard complaints about the undue influence of "courtiers" and "cabals". They are usually aired when a party is experiencing difficulties; not when it is streets ahead in the polls. David Cameron is by no means in trouble. Yet some of the older heads around him are advising the Conservative leader to adopt a more "inclusive" approach over coming months.

One of the "courtiers" is, of course, Mr Cameron's director of communications, Andy Coulson (pictured below). He is regularly referred to as one of the "quartet" at the head of the Conservative Party - the others being Mr Cameron himself, the shadow chancellor, George

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Osborne, and the director of strategy, Steve Hilton. Mr Coulson has become indispensable to the Conservative leader and is feared within Downing Street. Even though most of the more bizarre expenses claims have been made by Conservative MPs, Mr Cameron himself emerged from the affair in better shape than Gordon Brown. Mr Coulson was forced to resign from his previous post as editor of the *News of the World* over a phone tapping scandal in which a journalist on the paper was convicted and handed down a prison sentence. He is now facing renewed questions about how widespread the practice was when he was in charge. Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs have called on David Cameron to sack him. David Cameron will do everything he can to keep Andy Coulson on board, in contrast to the way he has handled some of his backbench MPs in recent months.



Another test for David Cameron in the months ahead concerns the frequently heard claim that, unlike Tony Blair in 1996-97, he has yet to “seal the deal” with the electorate. This will not unduly worry Mr Cameron, who has always argued that winning the election is “a marathon not a sprint”. He and his inner circle are conscious to the point of paranoia against appearing to be complacent about victory.

Moreover, some Conservative advisers with longer memories say that a more accurate parallel is with 1978-79, the run-up to Margaret Thatcher’s first victory. At the same stage of the electoral cycle, victory for this “untried” and “inexperienced” leader was far from assured. In the summer of 1978, during a period of economic crisis, Labour were ahead of the Conservatives in some polls. David Cameron and his party are in a much better place than Margaret Thatcher and her colleagues were. Yet there are still people within the Conservative Party who look at the current economic situation and assume that they should have a much bigger lead over Labour.

David Cameron is acutely aware of the dangers of sitting back and taking the next election for granted. He has always recognised that mere discontent with Gordon Brown and the Labour government will not be enough to hand him the keys to Number 10. He knows that disgruntled voters need positive reasons for voting Conservative. Above all, like Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Tony Blair in 1997, Mr Cameron has to be seen as being on side with the public’s aspirations and expectations.

None of this is easy at the best of times. It is infinitely more difficult when the country is in deep recession and the public finances are in such a parlous condition. There is literally no money available to spend. For much of the past two months, Mr Cameron has devoted his time to neutralising what Mr Brown would like to be the key dividing line at the next election, “Tory cuts versus Labour investment”. Instead, Mr Cameron has sought to portray the choice as “Conservative honesty versus Labour dishonesty” over public expenditure, coming very close to actually accusing the prime minister of being a liar on the issue. Most commentators believe that Mr Cameron has had the better of the exchanges. A ComRes poll published today found that more of the public trust him to be honest over public spending than Mr Brown.

David Cameron is still extremely cautious about revealing his hand in too much detail until much closer to polling day. The pledge on inheritance tax made at the 2007 party conference was forced on the party at a time when it was behind in the polls and it looked as if Mr Brown might call a snap election. Like Margaret Thatcher before him, David Cameron wants to go into the final straight without offering too many hostages to fortune.

One example is David Cameron’s speech on quangos this week. The proposed title, ‘a bonfire of quangos’, was quickly changed to ‘reforming quangos’. David Cameron referred to only two quangos that would be reformed - OFCOM and the QCDA. Otherwise, he set out broad

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principles, while making it clear that a Conservative government would make significant changes to the roles, responsibilities and numbers, of quangos.

According to some reports, Mr Cameron has already begun making plans for how Downing Street might be run should he become prime minister in just under a year's time. There is speculation that he wants to run a joint office with his closest ally, George Osborne - who remains by a country mile the second most important person in the Conservative Party. This would resemble the set up they currently have in the suite of offices in the Norman Shaw South Building in Parliament.

Conservative insiders have been quick to quash these suggestions. David Cameron remembers too well the hubris that damaged the then Labour leader, Neil Kinnock in the 1992 election campaign. This might well be David Cameron's last summer before becoming the first Conservative prime minister of the 21st century. But he knows that there is still a long and potentially rocky road to travel before that becomes a reality. Some commentators might believe that the election is there for the taking. David Cameron is taking nothing for granted.