



An Chartlann Náisiúnta
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A conversation with Kenneth Clarke

Clarke made a number of points of interest in relation to the Conference, the Cabinet and Mrs. Thatcher's contribution to the Conservative Party:

- He warmly approved of the emphasis laid at this year's Conference on "teamwork". (The Conference slogan, devised by Kenneth Baker, was "The right team for Britain's future"). The revival of this "long forgotten" concept was essential - first, because the wounds caused by the "appalling" handling of the Cabinet reshuffle last July had still to be healed; and secondly, because Labour had just completed an undeniably successful Conference (which presented a high-calibre front-bench team) and a fresh approach on the Tories' part was called for.
- The Prime Minister, "to give her her due", had accepted the concept and had done nothing during the Conference to undermine it. Clarke hoped that, when Conference was over, she would recognise that her own electoral standing would improve if she were seen to "pull back" a little and allow her team to occupy centre-stage for a while.
- The present Cabinet is, in fact, a genuinely united team. Fewer tensions exist between its members than in previous Thatcher Cabinets to which Clarke belonged and, although the Prime Minister still "plays the school-mistress a bit too much", the atmosphere at Cabinet meetings is on the whole more relaxed than in the past.

- A major reason for this is that there are "almost no Thatcherites" left in the Cabinet. Despite public perceptions to the contrary, the present Cabinet is, in fact, "wetter even than her 1979 Cabinet". This is partly because the Prime Minister's various favourites have failed to come up to the mark. Norman Tebbit "flared up briefly but then faded away". John Moore, once tipped as her eventual successor, also disappointed expectations.
- The other part of the reason, however, is that Mrs. Thatcher, for all her traditional Tory prejudices, is "aggressively meritocratic" in her approach to Cabinet appointments. She recognises, and rewards, merit. Thus, there was no surprise whatsoever about her recent promotion of Chris Patten, even though he is a leading "wet".
- John Major, the other great beneficiary of the July reshuffle, is an even better example. Though perceived to be a "Thatcher stooge", he is in fact "deeply liberal" and emphatically does not belong to her wing of the party. His extraordinary abilities, long evident within the Cabinet, commended him to her and his elevation this summer came as no surprise. Although he is an unimpressive public speaker, Major performs very well in smaller groups (best of all in a one-to-one situation) and is unquestionably the star of the present Cabinet.
- Clarke himself has never been in Mrs. Thatcher's "inner circle", as he put it. Indeed, "we do not really get on". However, she has given him steady advancement in the Cabinet and he likes to think of himself, coming from an underprivileged Northern working-class background, as a further illustration of her meritocratic approach.
- History, he suggested, may well decide that Margaret Thatcher's lasting contribution to the Conservative Party has been to transform it from a narrowly class-bound party of "toffs and old boys" into a modern, classless political movement.

Yours sincerely

David Donoghue

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