

White 1990

TORY DEMOCRACY: ITS TIME HAS COME

The slogan "Tory Democracy" was first coined by Lord Randolph Churchill in the 19th. century. He wanted to get the newly-enfranchised working class to vote Conservative; I want to democratise the Conservative party.

I write this article on Friday, November 23 - between ballots. I would have voted with no hesitation for Margaret Thatcher on the first ballot, I believe that a simple majority of votes should have been enough to elect her and that Michael Heseltine withdrawn from the second round, as Reginald Maudling did for less reason in 1965. The situation where a candidate with an absolute majority on the first ballot can be overturned on a second one has been justly described as a cowards' charter; as much as I dislike him, at least Michael Heseltine had the nerve to challenge in the open. I hate to have to admit it but the Labour and Liberal Democratic parties manage things better than the Conservatives.

What do I propose? I have more than one alternative. Both my plans share the common features that the party leader would be elected in July, thus giving a new leader the summer "closed season" to settle in, like a new US President has ten weeks between election and inauguration; that he appoint his Deputy, subject to confirmation by MPs; that, if the leader walks under the proverbial bus, the Deputy (who must be an MP) takes over until the next leadership election; if they both go MPs elect a new leader; and that MPs vote openly rather than in secret.

My first plan would require a national list of all Party members--not, I trust, beyond the capabilities of Central Office. It's quite simple--require 10% of MPs to nominate each candidate with open rather than secret nominations; then hold a postal ballot of all Party members. If no one gets over 50% in this ballot, then hold a run-off among MPs between the top two candidates. The second alternative is for MPs to elect the leader, by Alternative Vote rather than the present drawn-out system of exhaustive ballots. This would force all candidates to enter at the start and get the election over in a day.

Why the "10% to nominate" requirement only in the first instance? Because it would keep down the number of candidates, ensure that they were all well-known, to party members, and also ensure that they had a significant Parliamentary following. The run-off provision would ensure that the new leader was acceptable to MPs, as the leader obviously must be. Furthermore--it doesn't matter so much that MPs might have to choose between a lot of candidates, since they already "know

the chaps" (Harold Wilson). The provision for open voting is so that we know how our MPs voted; no MP worthy of respect would object to this - and those who pledged their support to both sides in this election or who promised one way and voted another are not worthy of respect. And I for one do not like the thought of the Conservatives being seen as less open and democratic than the Labour Party.

The second part of my proposals concerns the selection of Parliamentary candidates. I favour holding General Elections every four years in mid-October and in selecting all candidates the previous July by postal ballot with Alternative Vote. No one would be allowed to try for more than one constituency and all prospective candidates would have to be proposed and seconded by two members of the local party. All party members would be sent a ballot paper, a pre-paid envelope, and a piece or two of paper containing a biographical and political statement from each candidate. This would result in more broadly--selected candidates, stop would-be MPs trying for one seat after another, and stop small activist cliques (or for that matter Central Office) removing dissident MPs without the assent of the full party. I also believe that it would give us more independent-minded MPs who listen to their constituents and consciences rather than the Whips and would also work in favour of local boys and celebrities rather than identikit careerists.

On a national level--postal ballots would have elected Maudling over Heath, Heath over Thatcher, and Thatcher over Heseltine. She would also, of course, still be leader in a straight vote among MPs without the 15% rule.