

WHAT NEXT FOR THE OPPOSITION PARTIES?

Joe Kimble talks to Mark Fox, the former political correspondent of the Mail on Sunday and Sunday Express and adviser to William Hague

THE GREAT thing people never realise is that when William Hague took over John Major was literally walking out of the office with a briefcase under his arm. When we took over there was a very small group of us, and there was nothing there. We walked into empty offices, there was no staff, no secretaries, no computers, hardly a phone. William in those first few weeks held it together through sheer guts, whilst a team of brand new people, no insiders, got to grips with what was left of the party machinery.

Did the fact that new people took over lead to any mistrust?

I think it was very difficult because the machine had given its all. Really good people were knackered, fed up and demoralised. William treated everybody in CCO and senior members of the last cabinet with a great deal of respect, and he carried it through very carefully. Then people said: "Why is William going on about reform of the party? This is just a distraction, what's going on?" Well the truth is that we are now having a leadership election where for the first time in either of the major political parties, every single member, whoever they are, will have a vote on who leads them.

Do you think this means that any candidate has to appeal to the core vote almost to the exclusion of moderates?

Well I think it was perfectly clear that at the time the ordinary party membership would have chosen Ken Clarke.

William was chosen by MPs not by party members. And I think one of the most far-sighted things he's done for the Conservative Party is to understand that in modern politics leaders have to be

chosen by a majority of the party membership, so that they have the authority and the clout to get their business done.

You don't think it makes it impossible for a centrist candidate?

I think it makes it much more likely that a centrist candidate will come through. The vast majority of Conservatives are sensible, moderate and mainstream.

Do those people tend to join the party?

It's a bit of a myth that activists in the Conservative Party tend to be old. The Conservative Party had more Asian candidates at the last but one general election than any other party in history. So how is it that we are perceived as racist? It's rubbish, nonsense, but damaging nonetheless.

Do you think it was wrong of Mr Hague not to withdraw the whip from John Townend?

I would never criticise a decision of that kind because as leader you have to balance up all sorts of information that you're getting, but I would have withdrawn the whip. We need to show a big gap between where the Conservative Party is and where John Townend seemed to be.

So what was it like working under Mr Hague?

It was genuinely very inspiring. He is personally charismatic, extremely considerate, extraordinarily decisive and clear thinking.

That's the side that, it's said, doesn't come across.

Yes, there's a side that refuses to obfuscate, that refuses to dissemble. If he has one political weakness it's that he says this is what I believe in and this is what I'm going to campaign on, and unlike leaders in other parties who will duck and dodge and weave, William won't. He takes issues head on.

What sense did you have of the direction he was taking the party? Did you have any qualms that you were

concentrating on asylum, the euro and taxes too much?

We needed to have a very clear line on Europe because the Conservative Party had got itself into a historic knot. Hague represented the flexible wing of euro-wariness, and he framed a European approach which he could put forward with conviction, and that the majority of MPs were happy with.

Wasn't putting entry off for one Parliament an argument that could be undermined?

You can always be undermined with any sensible argument, and it's not easy to put a sensible argument about anything, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't try. He tried, and he held the line. Euro-division was not the story of the last election like it was in '97.

Do you think that was people just biding their time?

Maybe, but the point is we went through the election as a cohesive and co-ordinated force. But things change, so the right policy then may not be the right policy in the future. Personally I think renegotiations of treaties and all that caper is a step too far, and undermines the case for credible euro-currency wariness. That needs to be disentangled from a broad hostility to a European membership in general. Reconsidering our membership of the European Union is basically not the real world.

Would you have preferred to see a greater concentration on public services, as people indicated in poll after poll were their top priorities?

The Conservative Party needs to find a way of putting over its values in a way that people find attractive once again, and we haven't managed that yet, and that goes beyond whether you concentrate on this issue or that issue. It comes down to a whole approach, it goes to what people smell and taste about a political party.

Do you think people view the Tories'

message as extreme and populist, for instance Tony Martin, asylum, fuel?

Well the campaign on stealth taxes has been a huge success. But similarly Blair's branding of William as a bandwagon jumper was also a success. The point is that, if people were really as turned off by William Hague as people like to say, we'd have actually lost seats. The message wasn't disastrous, it just wasn't a huge success. And anyway how do you win elections without putting across a populist message?

Do you think you managed to convey an intelligible message?

Yes I do. But the Tory Party still has a massive problem when it talks about the public sector. We have to face that

because we pumped money into it like there was no tomorrow. So we've got to find a dialogue that people find intelligible and convincing. We have to find a way of riding the surf, like Margaret Thatcher and John Major did, and Tony Blair is doing now.

The success of Labour could be attributed to the fact that they tacked to the right, but their voters on the left still largely vote for them. If the Tory Party go to the centre – instead of to the right as they were heading – their voters will surely still vote for them as they don't have anywhere else to go.

I think you're confusing Hague's message on the euro with a general swing to the right. His commitment to state

involvement in the health service and education was not right wing. The Conservative Party didn't get any credit for the fact that in William Hague they had a leader committed to these services. The party did not get its commitment to these services through enough.

People still haven't forgiven the Tories. Do you think you need an exorcism? Will people still be embarrassed to admit they vote Tory in five years?

No, we don't need an exorcism. William Hague has put the party back on its feet, and it's a party people want to lead. We can win the next election, but we need to forge a new bond of trust with the British people. People are absolutely fed up with the schmozzle of New Labour.