

14th January 2016, The Times, Tim Montgomerie

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article4664722.ece>

Blue-rinse brigade is going to pick next PM

What kind of leader will the Tory grassroots go for when David Cameron steps down? It will have an impact on us all

Tim Montgomerie

I thought I was doing well but two minutes into my little speech to a Conservative fundraiser a grand woman at the back of the village hall shouted to her neighbour: "I can't hear a word he's saying." Her booming voice was a cross between Lady Grantham and Margaret Thatcher. Just as I was about to make an effort to speak up, her neighbour cut the ground from under me with her two word reply: "Lucky you!" The audibly challenged lady gave up wrestling with her hearing aid, nodded gravely and turned ostentatiously to her copy of The Daily Telegraph.

The thought that 100,000 or so Tory members will choose Britain's next prime minister might fill you with as much fear as I felt that night. We have, after all, had recent experience of unrepresentative grassroots activists choosing a party leader. The decision of Labour supporters to install Jeremy Corbyn as leader of Her Majesty's Opposition means that the person Conservative activists choose to succeed David Cameron is likely to be in 10 Downing Street for the best part of the next decade. It's important they make a wiser choice.

Tory members were first given the right to elect their leader in the late 1990s but nearly lost the privilege after they chose Iain Duncan Smith over Ken Clarke in 2001. Tory high-ups decided that members made the wrong choice and there was an attempt by Michael Howard to restore the supremacy of the parliamentary party. That effort was rightly defeated. It would have been outrageous for a party that promoted democracy behind the Iron Curtain and in the trade union movement to roll back democracy within its own organisation.

Later in this parliament, subject to rumoured modifications by Lord Feldman's review of party organisation, Tory members will select the next PM. Three questions need to be answered about this innovative moment in the nation's democracy: How will the selection process work? What does this powerful selectorate believe? And who will they choose?

The process should be pretty simple. One senior backbencher told me that there might be a dozen candidates but only two names will be submitted to a nationwide ballot of party members. Tory MPs need to do what Labour MPs failed to do last summer. They shouldn't shortlist anyone they are not happy to serve.

So, my second question: is the Tory membership full of Lady Grantham-types? Full of people who are out of touch with the modern world? That is certainly the stereotype - a stereotype I've probably

compounded with my introduction. But it's unfair. From Stratford-on-Avon to Arundel and South Downs, deep blue Conservative associations have chosen ethnic minority or openly gay MPs and have done so without the imposition of patronising all-women or all-minority shortlists. Every single one of the dozens of women, gay and black and Asian Tory MPs in parliament are there because the Conservative rank-and-file decided they were better equipped to represent them than the white, straight men that they were free to choose.

You won't be surprised to learn from ConservativeHome.com surveys that Tory members are much more, well, Tory than most Britons. Two-thirds lean towards leaving the EU. 80 per cent backed air strikes against Isis in Syria. They want aid spending in the developing world diverted to flood defences in Britain.

These policy positions don't tell the whole truth, however. Before the last election three quarters backed a deal with the Liberal Democrats, if a coalition was necessary. Only a half wanted an arrangement with Ukip. The growth of Ukip has certainly changed the Conservative party. It partly explains why the membership is half the size of a decade ago. It also explains why the staunchest opponents of gay equality and immigration can now be found wearing purple, not blue rosettes.

And then there's the electability factor. Winning really matters to Tory members. Ten years ago David Davis' politics were probably closer to those of the average Conservative member but 67 per cent of them backed David Cameron; the candidate who emphasised modernisation. Interestingly, a higher proportion of Tory MPs backed right-wing candidates in the 2005 Tory leadership race than Tory members. Party members may be the more "moderate" wing of the party.

Who will they back in 2019 - increasingly the smart bet for when David Cameron (who is enjoying being PM more than ever) steps down? Anyone making a firm prediction is a fool. Six months ago George Osborne was the hot favourite but he has been hurt by his mishandling of the tax credits row and the gamble he took in last year's autumn statement that growth would finish the job of deficit reduction. Boris, the darling of the rubber chicken and selfie circuit, has to be favourite but don't rule out an outside candidate like Priti Patel.

I made the mistake of not listing her as a likely Outer in my column last week. She has yet to prove she has the intellectual range for the toughest job in public life but she's liked by other MPs, has deep beliefs and a great personal story. She could soon become something of a household name if she puts her heart and soul into the looming referendum campaign. This Asian Tory woman would stand out in a crowd of white, male Eurosceptics. And Tory members have loved a strong, straight-talking woman before and it worked out very well at three general elections.