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<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/recruits-are-on-the-march-to-mrs-mays-tories-m6mj0cqf2>

Recruits are on the march to Mrs May's Tories;

Thousands of voters, many who supported Remain, want to help shape the post-Brexit future

Francis Elliott

Theresa May's sisterly advice to George Osborne as she sacked him was that if he wanted to lead the Conservative Party he ought to get to know it. A councillor for eight years, twice an unsuccessful parliamentary candidate, in three leaders' shadow cabinets holding six different briefs including party chairman, home secretary for six years, legendary consumer of rubber chicken - it is safe to say Mrs May knows her party.

At least until recently. What Tory agents describe as an "intense surge" in membership since the referendum has left the new prime minister, the former chancellor and all other Tory MPs a little less sure than they were about the nature of the Conservative rank and file.

Conservative HQ reckons that the national membership of about 150,000 has seen at least a 10 per cent uplift since the referendum. At first Andrew Kennedy, the agent for West Kent, was suspicious when his local associations reported a hundred applications a day. "Was this influx something organised by one of the left-wing pressure groups protesting about the EU vote? Or perhaps an exercise by jubilant Ukip supporters riding a post-referendum tidal wave and landing on our shore?" he asked on the ConservativeHome website.

Mr Kennedy set himself the task of finding out. Far from being returning Ukipers, four fifths had never before joined any party, and a narrow majority voted to remain in the EU. For the most part, according to one amazed Tory MP, they are "solid citizens who have taken the decision that politics can no longer be safely left to others and that they need to get involved". A quarter had mistakenly believed they would have a vote in the Tory leadership election and may drift away, but the rest appear to be fully committed.

While Corbynistas and their enemies trade ever more shrill abuse on social media - "the ends justify the memes" - thousands of recently engaged centrists, the sort of people that Labour once attracted, are choosing the Conservatives as the best way to make their voice heard.

It is not irrational, after all, to want to join the governing party if you want a say in the sort of Brexit that Britain will eventually choose. Some 40 per cent of the new members in West Kent said they signed up because, as Remain voters, they wanted to shape the future on the EU. And it is even less irrational if that party makes you feel welcome. Tory MPs are holding reception events for new members: Labour is sending them straight to "compliance".

For a while Labour moderates allowed themselves to believe that infuriated Remainers would help them to sweep out Jeremy Corbyn on a tide of outrage. Those hopes have faded as the bitter truth of the latest influx begins to dawn: initial sampling of the 140,000 new registered supporters suggests that at least 60 per cent back Corbyn. Labour may just have taken in another deep draught of the same medicine it swallowed last summer.

If the Kent findings reflect a national picture and the sampling is correct, Labour is being dragged further left by its new membership while the Tory recruits are more strongly anchoring their party in the centre ground.

Patrick McLoughlin, appointed party chairman by Theresa May to replace Lord Feldman of Elstree, certainly hopes so. Like Mrs May, Mr McLoughlin did the hard yards of councillor and failed candidate on his route to Westminster. His first email to members bluntly alerted them to the departure of David Cameron's Notting Hill set. "I've come from the coalmines of Cannock right up to the cabinet," he told them. No danger of a soya skinny latte frappé in his café.

The new chairman will be careful to pay Lord Feldman due regards - the peer may have been Mr Cameron's university buddy and tennis chum but he also paid off the party's debts and built a war chest that some believe is in excess of £50 million. It helped to pay for an election-winning machine that increased the number of Tory MPs from 198 when he took over to 330 when he left.

Yet Cameron and Feldman privately believe they achieved this despite, not because of, ordinary Tory party members. Their formula was simple: raise big bucks, pay top dollar. Sir Lynton Crosby and Jim Messina, two of the foreign consultants who delivered the 2015 election victory, don't come cheap. Faced with an ageing immobile activist base, largely unable or unwilling to carry out the sort of traditional doorstep work that used to win elections, Lord Feldman invested deeply in the best social media marketing experts that money could buy to deliver the message and get out the vote. Given the mutual contempt between the professional centre of the party and the voluntary base out in the shires, it is not surprising that Tory membership more than halved between 2002 and 2013, or that many of those who remained were sullen and resentful.

Now, as he seeks to reset the relationship, Mr McLoughlin is considering handing back powers of policymaking to the rank and file. It would be a smart first step in persuading some of the Tories' new recruits to stick around.