

5th September 2016, *The Times*, <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tories-should-have-faith-in-their-grassroots-bqn3b9fns>

Tories should have faith in their grassroots;

Party members must not be banned from electing a leader - they need more power, not less

Mark Wallace

What possessed the members of the Conservative Party, 15 years ago this month? Newly entrusted with the power to choose their leader, they proceeded to elect Iain Duncan Smith, one of the most woeful opposition leaders of modern times. The decision has been interpreted ever since by MPs and observers alike as a sign that card-carrying Conservatives are deranged - "swivel-eyed loons", in the alleged words of a certain former senior CCHQ official.

The experience left scars on the parliamentary Conservative Party. When Mr Duncan Smith was unseated in 2003, MPs refused to offer the membership any choice at all, opting unanimously for Michael Howard. When Mr Howard stood down in 2005, he attempted to strip the membership of their power and put MPs completely in charge once more. The 1922 Committee supported him. Happily, after concerted resistance, the proposal to return the party to feudalism failed to pass.

So it isn't a surprise to see the idea crop up again, raised this time by Andrew Tyrie, chairman of the Treasury select committee, who was cheerleader for Mr Howard's proposals the first time round. In Mr Tyrie's letter, Andrea Leadsom's name has joined Mr Duncan Smith's in the column marked "cautionary tales". He argues that her withdrawal from the leadership race was a "narrow escape" for the government, which could have been saddled with a prime minister who did not have the support of MPs.

He is right that such a situation would have been extremely difficult. The backdrop of Labour's civil war is a warning to Conservative MPs of what might happen if the grassroots get too uppity. Mr Tyrie's implication is that the continued presence of democracy in the Tory leadership rules poses an ever-present threat of a Blue Corbyn surging to power. This argument is certainly attention-grabbing and it plays to various fashionable themes, but it is bogus.

The Conservative Party is very different from Labour. It would never allow people to buy a vote on the leadership for a mere £3 after a contest had been declared. Tens of thousands of people paid £25 to join this summer in the hope of a vote on the new prime minister, only to find that the franchise is wisely restricted to those who were members before the ballot was called.

pullquoteThe idea of a Blue Corbyn surging to power is bogus

Not only are the parties different, so are their members. Mr Tyrie may not trust us, but grassroots Conservatives have reliably exercised good judgment when it comes to leadership elections. His chosen example does not hold up to scrutiny. Mrs Leadsom withdrew her candidacy precisely because she could foresee her defeat at the hands of Theresa May. Even she did not expect the membership to force her as leader on an unwilling parliamentary party.

Mr Howard's fears in 2005 were similarly proved to be unfounded, as the membership went on to elect his preferred candidate, David Cameron. It was a wise choice - for all the grumbling, Mr Cameron did return his party to power.

Even Mr Duncan Smith's victory in 2001 was the right call in retrospect. Yes, he was a disastrous leader. But the pain was short-term and he was soon ejected by MPs. The alternative, Ken Clarke, would have sparked a far more serious and long-lasting crisis. Electing a leader who supported joining the euro would have caused a permanent and sizeable split, driving far more Conservative activists, voters and perhaps even MPs into the arms of Ukip.

So the answer to the question I posed at the start is this: the only thing that possessed the Conservative membership 15 years ago was cold logic. Forced to choose between a candidate with unacceptable views and an incapable candidate, they chose the route of least damage. The party survived mostly intact as a result.

If anybody exhibited poor judgment in that long-ago contest it was Conservative MPs. Could they not foresee such an outcome, given the power of the euro as an issue? If they could, why did they not put a more acceptable and capable alternative to Mr Clarke through to the final?

It is depressing that the old, flawed argument against democracy refuses to die. Any MPs tempted by it should consider its inherent contradictions. Tories are supposed to believe in balancing rights and responsibilities. It is inconsistent to expect grassroots Conservatives to bear the onerous responsibilities of leafleting and fundraising without any right to decide the direction of the party.

Conservative MPs like to recommend that we "trust the people": to decide our EU membership, to choose how to raise our children, to spend our money as we wish. It is not unreasonable to expect that we should therefore trust rank-and-file Tories to choose their leader. Furthermore, MPs are selected as candidates by a vote of their local members. If those members have such poor judgment, what does that say about those candidates they select to enter parliament?

Until recently, there was a general acceptance that reversing the decline in the Tory grassroots required there to be some reward for getting involved. CCHQ experimented with forms of direct democracy, such as open primaries, and the relative costs and benefits of party membership were under review. Mr Corbyn and Mrs Leadsom may have spooked some on the green benches but the principle remains correct: a long-term future for the Conservative Party requires more internal democracy, not less. Mark Wallace is executive editor of ConservativeHome, a website for party activists