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The Conservative Party conference: a report, part V

by David Pryce-Jones

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The Conservative Party marathon to choose a new leader lasted for seven months, but it has finally come to an end, and David Cameron has won. He obtained 68 percent of the vote, where his rival David Davis had 32 percent – a huge margin, then, of two to one.

The two candidates were in strong contrast. Cameron is only 39, some twenty years or so younger than Davis, and he has been in Parliament for less than five years as opposed to Davis's eighteen. He does his best to laugh away an education at Eton and Oxford, and the press has discovered with glee that somewhere and somehow a child of King Charles II and the royal mistress Nell Gwynne adorns his family tree. David Davis, meanwhile, did his best to emphasise that his was a one-parent family living on a tough council estate. So novelty, easy manner, youthfulness, has triumphed over experience, and what could be sensed in Davis as inflexibility of character. This is a measure of the Party's wish to throw out the Blair government. The hope is to succeed by turning the page, by skipping a generation in favour of someone new, altogether taking a risk.

David Cameron has gathered around him the brightest of young Tory members of Parliament, men like George Osborne, Ed Vaizey and Michael Gove. The talk is all of modernisation, and it often veers into comfortable softness about a modern compassionate party, and the need to change in order to win. A smiling Cameron insists that there is something in the air, by which he means that he and his Party can at last appeal to the country. In his acceptance speech, he spoke about two simple principles guiding him, namely, trusting people and sharing responsibility. On big issues such as patriotism, independence and the relationship with the European Union, even the Iraqi campaign, he has been guarded to the point of evasion.

Granted the absence of the language and political appeal of all previous Conservative leaders, Cameron is naturally being compared to Blair. *Private Eye*, the satirical magazine, has a cover with parallel photographs of them both under the caption, 'World's First Face Transplant A Success.' And just as Blair is supposed to have swept away the bad old Labour Party, so the prospect is that Cameron will sweep away the unregenerate and ageing Tories, those unable or unwilling to adjust to contemporary Britain, still preferring to have back the country they once had.

In one of the moments that indeed endear him to the electorate, Cameron confessed that the task before him is a nightmare. One outcome might be to dispel the old party but recruit nobody in its place. Another might be to rejuvenate the party only to find that it is a pointless Blairite clone. Cameron is the fifth leader of the party since 1997, and it falls to him to define what Conservatism is in Britain in this day and age. And it is almost certainly the last chance to do so.

David Pryce-Jones is the author, most recently, of *Openings & Outings: An Anthology* (Criterion Books).