

## DO WE NEED THESE TORIES NOW?

Once they ran Britain and Britain ran the world. But the glory days have gone for the Tories - and in Scotland they seem to have gone for good. Iain Fraser Grigor reports on a once-mighty party that sowed the wind - and now must pay the whirlwind.

AS IN all good fairy tales, it seems a long, long time ago now. But this particular fairy tale is true, and it tells the story of a mighty and mass political movement called the Conservative Party. Its vibrant and ever-so-bawdy landed ancestors oversaw a merchants' empire of fantastic wealth. In its more mature - though no less bawdy - years it helped Britain to an industrial and colonial influence unequalled on the globe.

And in its full maturity of the last century, it still presumed to set a proper course for Britain's affairs, between the rocks and rapids of worldwide war, growing electoral competition at home, and the inexorable development of industrial and military challenges from abroad.

But today - as if faces once more election defeat on a British scale and a second and probably final annihilation in Scotland - the Conservative party must wonder if, in terms of the broad sweep of history, it now stands on the brink of oblivion. For William Hague will lose the coming general election on a crushing scale, and will soon thereafter be banished to the grim outer darkness preserved by his party for failed leaders. That is the harsh law of politics in any party.

In England, of course, the party will survive at least in the short- or even mid-term, as some sort of official opposition, with some sort of parliamentary presence, though its strategists - should

it have any - must tremble at the thought of a split over Europe, and the memory of the 30-year exile from power occasioned by the party's catastrophic fracture after the Corn Laws controversy.

But in Scotland, the prognosis must be thought as grimly terminal. Last weeks' polls, after all, found that Labour can expect up to 50 percent of the popular vote in the general election, and the Scottish National Party about a quarter. But the Conservatives are on course to collect just 12 percent of Scottish votes - a result which will once again see them fail to win even one of the 72 Scottish seats at Westminster. And it will too almost certainly see the end of the long political career of the Scottish Tories' only real heavyweight, Sir Malcolm Rifkind. After that, for each of them - oblivion.

And yet the fairy tale of effortless supremacy - until not so long ago - must indeed have once seemed without end. Until very recent times - perhaps, indeed, until the arrival of New Labour - the Conservatives were the natural party of government in Britain. Old Labour popped into a government of sorts in the 'twenties and 'thirties, of course. But when they swept the boards in the 1945 'khaki election', Major Atlee's chums made the somewhat silly mistake of trying to finance a welfare state from a position of economic bankruptcy.

The Tories, just as nature seemed always to have intended, were soon back in power, in the same way that they bounced back to power all the way through the previous century - when the Liberals really were a party to reckon with.

And throughout it all, they were led by giants - often drunken, frequently flawed, sometimes even a little more than merely mad: but giants nevertheless, of vision, of intellect and will on the

grandest of scales. They had to be, after all. They helped create the greatest mercantile and industrial empire ever seen in history, and transform their party from a rump of landowning reaction to a mass force of industrial capital with the backing of the middle-class - and even a big slice of the newly-enfranchised working class too.

In a world where politics was power and power was national interest, these men were brutal masters of a subtle art.

But the last of these was half a century ago, in the imposing and brandy-fortified shape of the onetime Liberal, Winston Churchill. Or, rather, he was the last in the great tradition - to chose but a handful of names - of Peel and Disraeli and Salisbury and Balfour.

For the strutting and strident chemist called Thatcher can not be ignored. The very threat of her hectoring and perfumed presence would have occasioned something close to hysteria in the great Tory grandees of the past. But she had the succesful politician's great blessing of luck in an idiot opposition, a favourable public mood, and the support of an American state machine (of which support historians may yet have much to tell us).

But the chemist couldn't crack Scotland - and it is in Scotland that her party's chickens have now come home to roost. And - by the look of last week's polls - to roost with a vengeance for ever.

Consider the evidence. Even in Old Labour's great Victory in Europe (and Japan) year of 1945, the Tories took 27 Westminster seats in Scotland, and just over 40 percent of the vote. Ten years later, they took 36 seats, and 50 percent of the vote. But since then, it has been downhill all the way.

By 1966 and the long hot summers of the Swinging Sixties, they were down to 20 seats, though they still commanded just under 40 percent of the vote. In 1979, they took 22 seats and around 30

percent. But in the 1983, 1987 and 1992 elections, their number of seats fell respectively from 21 via 10 to just 11.

And in 1997, the Scottish Tories played host to their Year Zero One, when they got just 20 percent of the vote and won no Westminster seats at all. Still - though they had dropped 250,000 votes on previous levels - one in six Scots did vote Tory, and the party did get around 18 percent of the popular vote.

Even then, the fall-out was considerable: and in this respect, let us call a spade a spade and let us call a lord a lord. Those former Scottish Secretaries and great patriots of the Tory cause in Scotland Ian Lang and Michael Forsyth - having been dumped by their constituencies - promptly dumped Scotland. They now recline on the cool leather benches of the House of Lords, while the latter, having tired of selling council-houses and gratuitously insulting poorly-paid teachers, has further contrived to make a fortune for himself in a London merchant bank.

But for those that chose to remain, the future is nothing if not grim. For if the Tories got 18 percent of the vote and still no seats in 1979 - how many seats can they expect this time, when their support is running at just 12 percent? Their long record of bitter opposition to a Scottish parliament meant that when it was elected they could only get seats on the back of proportional representation due to regional party lists.

Consider the case of Sir Malcolm Rifkind, for instance, who is in charge of the Tory campaign for this general election, and is the one really talented (and very highly experienced) politician that they have in the country. Until 1979 he had held his Edinburgh Pentlands seat for 23 years. But with Tory support in Edinburgh running at no more than the national average, he is very unlikely to win it back on

June 7th. Nor is any other Edinburgh seat likely to fall to the Tories either.

And in Glasgow, the Tories at 4 percent are even trailing the Liberal Democrats at 6 percent and Tommy Sheridan's Scottish Socialist Party at 4 percent.

In other words, then, Scotland's heirs to the great Tory statesmen of the past now crouch in petrified awe, and stare straight in the face of their very own Year Zero Two.

Unlike their illustrious lordships, they cannot run away. There is no demented chemist on whom they can now call for covering fire. They face obliteration, in a political landscape where the bulk of the territory is now occupied by other forces. They are a sect in an increasingly sectarian party - a ragbag of careerists (and many honest enthusiasts, of course) who, in their heart of hearts, must often wish that they had hitched their wagon to some other mule. They command less and less public appeal - and are increasingly unable to devise policies that are at the same time unique, relevant and popular.

And worse: the question must be asked - what will the prospect of permanent opposition do to such a sect within a sect in a political landscape where the major players already hold the middle ground with middle-ground policies?

Only time will answer that question. But like Hosea, the Scottish Tories must reflect today: We have sowed the wind, and we will reap the whirlwind.

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