



The October 1963 Conservative Party Conference

D.R. Thorpe

This October marks the fiftieth anniversary of the most dramatic Party Conference the Conservatives ever held. The venue that autumn was Blackpool, scene of the first post-war Conference in 1946 when Anthony Eden had delivered his famous speech on ‘the property-owning democracy’, which had so boosted morale. Some similar upbeat message was much needed that autumn, as delegates assembled. The Party was still reeling from the fall-out of de Gaulle’s rejection of Britain’s application to join the EEC in January and of the Profumo affair in the summer. To add to the sense of anxiety, with a general election not far over the horizon, opinion polls were not encouraging. There was also much speculation as to whether Harold Macmillan would actually lead the Conservatives into the next election, due by October 1964. Party opinion was divided as to the best course of action, many believing that a new leader would give a better chance of victory over Labour’s recently elected leader, Harold Wilson, nineteen points ahead of Macmillan in public approval ratings that month. Few could have predicted the dramatic way in which the question of both Macmillan’s leadership and the identity of his successor would be decided in the next eleven days.

Macmillan’s eventual decision was not only of interest in Britain. David Bruce, the American Ambassador in London, had sent Dean Rusk, the American Secretary of State, a perceptive analysis of the mood of the Conservative Party after the debate in the Commons about the Profumo Affair. He correctly stressed that ‘on past record Conservative Party [is] capable of moving with brutal speed when fountainhead of Leader’s authority dries up.’ He told Rusk that ‘Conservatives [are] now beginning actively [to] consider when and by whom Macmillan should be replaced.’ The difficulty, as Bruce stated, was that ‘no single obvious alternative to Macmillan exists.’ By October the field of those considered to be *papabile* was larger still, owing to the passage of the Peerage Act on 31 July 1963, which allowed hereditary peers to disclaim their peerages within a fixed window. Even before this legislation had been passed, the political journalist Anthony Howard had written an article in the *New Statesman* in December 1962: ‘Mr Home and Mr Hogg?’ He predicted with startling accuracy that the next Conservative leader would either be Lord Home or Lord Hailsham. ‘Their very membership of the House of Lords may in the end turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to them: it has, as it were, sheltered them throughout the crucial

years and then put them down safe and sound within a few yards of the winning post.’ As the Conservatives assembled at Blackpool, the window was still open.

From the start of the Conference week, when a young holidaymaker had been drowned in the sea opposite the Imperial Hotel, the party headquarters for the week, the whole affair had seemed jinxed. Rumours abounded as to whether Macmillan’s health would allow him to continue – or indeed whether he wanted to continue. In those days the leader traditionally arrived, clouds descending, for the final day of the conference with a speech to rally the troops. It was felt that answers to the questions hovering over the future direction of the party must surely be resolved then. Had Macmillan stepped down in June 1963, as he had been seriously contemplating, so as to give his successor some eighteen months to establish himself before the next General Election, his successor would almost certainly have been the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Reginald Maudling, then riding high in popularity. But Macmillan stepped back from quitting the premiership as, understandably, he did not wish to be seen to be driven from office by a squalid scandal. Contrary to myth, the Profumo affair did not hasten Macmillan’s departure, it actually prolonged his premiership.

After close consultations with his son Maurice Macmillan and his son-in-law Julian Amery, Macmillan had decided before the Party Conference, when some kind of indication as to his intentions would be expected, that he would in fact lead the party into the next election. But the best laid plans can be overturned by unexpected events. On Tuesday 8 October (the fourth anniversary of his great 1959 Election victory) Macmillan was struck down by prostate trouble. Despite presiding, in great pain, over a

Cabinet meeting that morning and, for a short time, a party to celebrate the return from Admiralty House to 10 Downing Street after its lengthy renovations, Macmillan's doctors told him that there was no alternative to an immediate operation. Macmillan told Rab Butler, the First Secretary of State, and Alec Home, the Foreign Secretary, privately at the party that he would not fight the next election. The die was cast. Later that evening, the BBC announced that Macmillan was entering King Edward VII Hospital for an operation, though nothing was announced about his long-term plans for the future.

When this news reached Blackpool, speculation reached fever pitch. Only two politicians, Butler and Home, knew of Macmillan's definite decision to stand down, but most delegates assumed such a decision was now inevitable. The big question was as to his successor. When Butler arrived at the Imperial Hotel the next day, he appropriated the leader's suite that had been reserved for Macmillan, but this was to prove no guarantee of a future tenure of the newly renovated 10 Downing Street. Home, who was President of the National Union of Conservative Associations that year, remained in London and visited Macmillan in hospital on the morning of 9 October. He was at the hub of unfolding events.

The timing of the announcement of Macmillan's decision to stand down would clearly influence the result. If his resignation was announced during the conference it would favour candidates such as Hailsham, darling of the constituency associations, and indeed Home himself, who was in the eyes of many activists a latter day Plantagenet Palliser, 'such a one as justifies to the nation the seeming anomaly of a hereditary peerage and primogeniture.' If the announcement was delayed until Parliament reassembled later in the month, it would clearly favour Butler and Maudling, the leading candidates in the Commons. Indeed, Butler, sensing this, rang the hospital and let it be known that it was important for the Prime Minister to remember that the proceedings at Blackpool were more of a rally and that one did not take a serious decision at a rally. But his appeal was in vain.

Macmillan now drafted a letter to be read out by Home on arrival at Blackpool

stating that he would not be able to lead the party into the next election. The letter ended with the hope that 'it will soon be possible for the customary process of consultation to be carried on with in the party about its future leadership.' The phrase 'customary processes' was to enter political history – and indeed provide the title for Butler's chapter about these events in his memoirs. However, it was inaccurate, assuming precedents when none in fact existed. The leadership contests of 1911, 1923, 1940, and even 1957 when Macmillan became Prime Minister, were all *sui generis*. None bore any resemblance to the situation in Blackpool in October 1963.

Chairman, I, rather than Alec, went to the microphone, was painfully if politely evident.' Whispered messages from the platform suggested, as the financial survey continued, that the Chief Secretary should shorten his speech. But to no avail. Boyd-Carpenter continued for thirty minutes. Alec Home, wearing his half-moon spectacles, then came to the microphone. The audience was hushed, for instinctively people felt they were about to witness an important moment in British political history. Home duly began to read out the letter, which, even for many in the Cabinet, was the first intimation that Macmillan was standing down. The undisputed result of the announcement was that the



When Rab Butler delivered his speech on Saturday 12 October, the BBC interrupted Grandstand to carry live clips – but it failed to live up to such high expectations.

Home travelled to Blackpool on Thursday 10 October, letter in hand, to make the announcement. He took his place on the platform, as John Boyd-Carpenter, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, was about to reply to a debate on local government finance, never the most enticing of subjects, and certainly not that day. The platform began to fill with grandees as rumour spread through the Winter Gardens that an announcement was imminent about Macmillan's future. 'The disappointment', wrote Boyd-Carpenter in his memoirs, 'when, as directed by the

October 1963 Party Conference ceased at once to be such in any recognisable sense, and became instead the equivalent of an American Presidential nominating convention.

The first move was made that evening at an excitable meeting of the Conservative Political Centre, when Lord Hailsham announced that he intended to renounce his title and seek election to the Commons. This exuberant act was to bring his challenge to an end almost before it had begun. With the effective departure of Hailsham from the leadership stakes (his

cause not helped by the Americanized methods of Randolph Churchill, dispensing 'Q' buttons like some medieval Pardoner) the names of four candidates emerged – Butler, Maudling, Heath and Macleod. The choice soon narrowed to Butler or Maudling, but there were many, faced with this choice, who decided to look elsewhere. Prominent among them was Selwyn Lloyd, principal victim of Macmillan's Night of the Long Knives in July 1962.

Selwyn Lloyd was a pivotal figure in the unfolding events in three ways. He was prominent among those who pressed Home to stand; after his recent report into the Conservative Party organization he had influence – and sympathy because of July 1962 – from rank and file delegates; and his judgement was respected by Martin Redmayne, the Chief Whip. Many MPs could recall Lloyd in the corridors of the Imperial Hotel that week as fresh news broke saying, 'I'll have to go and see Alec about this.' On Friday 11 October, Redmayne and Lloyd took a private afternoon walk to assess the unfolding situation before events moved to London. Here they were accosted by an old-age pensioner who told them that his Socialist household recognized Home the qualities needed to lead the nation. Lloyd later declared that this pensioner was 'the gnarled voice of truth'.

Meanwhile Hailsham continued to seek the attention of delegates. Disastrously he was seen feeding his infant daughter baby food in the foyer of the Imperial Hotel. To Conservatives of that generation the proper person to be dispensing such care was the nanny – and in private. 'Never discount the baby food', observed Edward Heath later, 'as a factor in disqualifying Hailsham.'

On Friday 11 October Home began his speech in the foreign affairs debate with the remark, 'I am offering a prize to any newspaperman this morning who can find a clue in my speech that this is Lord Home's bid to take over the leadership of the Conservative Party.' He eventually sat down to a rapturous reception and that evening the BBC's Ian Trewothan said that Home had 'now emerged as the man who may be drafted into the premiership between Mr Butler and Lord Hailsham'. Significantly, Maudling had now dropped out of the reckoning. The previous evening Home and Maudling and had



Sir Alec Douglas-Home served as Prime Minister for a year before narrowly losing the 1964 election. He served as Foreign Secretary in 1970–74 – the last example of a Prime Minister serving in the Cabinet under one of his successors – before returning to the Upper House as Lord Home of the Hirsel. He was Grand Master of the Tory grassroots organization the Primrose League from 1966 to 1983, and was presented with this crystal vase by way of thanks.

been interviewed in turn by Robin Day in a curious, airless underground BBC studio in the Imperial Hotel where waiting politicians took their turn on an upturned orange box. As Home left after giving nothing away to Rob Day, Maudling said to Robin, 'Well, Alec is obviously going to run.'

Alec Home played the part of reluctant candidate that week to perfection, a fact that key figures in other camps were beginning to recognize and fear. The *New York Times's* political correspondent told Dennis Walters MP, a principal figure in the Hailsham camp, that Home's conduct throughout was exactly how compromise candidates behaved at American conventions.

On Saturday 12 October, the last day of the conference, Alec and Elizabeth Home lunched with Rab and Mollie Butler in the leader's suite in the Imperial Hotel before Butler made the closing speech. During

the lunch Home casually introduced what was a bombshell for Butler, who had deliberately stayed aloof from all the intrigue of the week and who thus substantially out of touch with what was happening. When Home told Butler that he was seeing his doctor in London the next week, Butler did not grasp the significance of the remark, and he asked him why. 'Because I have been approached about the possibility of my becoming Leader of the Conservative Party.' It is difficult to imagine a more unsettling piece of news for Butler to receive at what was already an anxious and nervous time for him.

Butler rose to speak at 2.15 p.m. So dramatic was the situation that the BBC (only one channel in those days) kept breaking into its Saturday afternoon sports programme *Grandstand* for frequent updates, which led to some ironic juxtapositions. One of the first items was boxing's 'Fight of the Week'. Robin Day commented: 'Here in Blackpool nobody had any idea that another fight of the week had been going on.' Almost inevitably, Butler's speech was lacking in the necessary uplift for the troops. Butler never forgot one of the headlines in the Sunday papers the next day: 'BUTLER FAILS TO ROUSE TORIES'.

So things moved to London, where two developments ensured that things were very different from previous leadership contests. Firstly, when the Queen returned from Balmoral in readiness for the appointment of the new Prime Minister, she stayed initially at Windsor Castle, not Buckingham Palace like George V in 1923 when Baldwin became Prime Minister, so as to remain firmly aloof from the feverish events in London. Secondly, the extensive consultations that then took place were for the first time in the Party's history, with the extra-Parliamentary party organizations, as well as with Conservative members of the Lords and Commons. Macmillan then, at the Palace's request, drew up a memorandum (published as an appendix for the first time in my 2010 biography of Macmillan) outlining the results of the various consultations. When the 'midnight meeting' of disenchanted Butler supporters met at Enoch Powell's house in South Eaton Place, in a vain attempt to prevent the recommendation of Home, Macmillan – with the help of his Parliamentary Private Secretary, Sir Knox Cunningham

– drew up an addendum to include details of this late development. The Queen visited the Prime Minister at the King Edward VII Hospital on 18 October and later that day invited Alec Home to form an administration. Home though did not kiss hands with the Monarch at that point, but said (like Lord Aberdeen in 1852 to Queen Victoria) that he would

report back if he was able to form an administration. Although Powell and Iain Macleod refused to serve, Butler – and, crucially, Maudling – did accept office and Home became Prime Minister the following day.

Despite all the myths that still surround these events, the last word belongs to Professor Vernon Bogdanor:

‘The outcome, the selection of Lord Home, cannot be said seriously to have misrepresented Conservative opinion at the time.’

■ **D.R. Thorpe** is the biographer of Harold Macmillan, Alec Douglas-Home and Selwyn Lloyd.

Memories of Blackpool '63

Lord Hunt of Wirral

I certainly remember well the lead-up to my first ever Conservative Party Conference in 1963. The Party leaders were preparing their troops for the approaching general election and Jo Grimond had declared dramatically to the Liberal Party: ‘I intend to march my troops towards the sound of gunfire!’ Harold Wilson, elected as Labour Party leader in February following the death of Hugh Gaitskell, told the Labour Conference: ‘the Britain that is going to be forged in the white heat of this revolution will be no place for restrictive practices or for outdated methods on either side of industry’. The Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, responded by sending in a sick note!

As we approached Blackpool for the 82nd Conservative Party Conference, I had just become a Bristol University Conservative. I was pleasantly surprised to find how welcome we were. At reception after reception, I was introduced to what seemed to be every leading member of the Conservative Party except the Prime Minister as they assembled under the banner ‘Conservative Britain is a Power for Peace’.

Sadly, Harold Macmillan went into King Edward VII Hospital to have a prostate operation and, whilst he was there, the Queen visited him and he gave her formal notification of his resignation. We all thought he was about to die. Ted Heath once told me a story which suggested Harold did too. Harold told Ted that, after the Queen’s visit to the

hospital, he had asked the Sister to draw the blinds and put out the lights. He was woken from a deep sleep by a noise in the room. He called out, ‘who’s that?’, whereupon a man emerged from under his bed to say that he was the electrician from the Post Office taking away ‘your secret scrambler telephone’. Harold said that, when he heard those words, ‘I knew I was dead!’ (In fact, it was not as bad as that: as D.R. Thorpe showed in his recent biography of Macmillan, his consultant Alec Badenoch had made it clear that he would recover.)

Back in Blackpool, I was amongst the hundreds who gave a standing ovation to Quintin Hailsham at the annual Conservative Political Centre (CPC) meeting, when he announced his intention to disclaim his viscounty in order to stand for the leadership. Although many felt Quintin had engaged in a tasteless publicity stunt, our local Bristol MP, Robert Cooke, issued us all with ‘Q’ badges, which we wore proudly: Quintin was very popular indeed.

I have so many still vivid recollections, including a speech by Alec Home, who, as President of the National Union of Conservative & Unionist Associations, took the chair for the Conference. Alec read out Harold Macmillan’s letter of resignation to a tense and serious hall. Later in the week, he joked with Conference that he thought he was probably the only person who was not a candidate for the leadership of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister. We all laughed. He was followed by Rab Butler, who was indeed a candidate but



A young David Hunt with Ted Heath.

who missed his great opportunity as the Conference speaker by making a rather monotonous and ineffective speech.

Another candidate, Iain Macleod, inspired us all and ended his Conference speech thus:

The Conservative Party is like dry timber and a spark will set it ablaze ... Strike now, therefore; carry this fight here from Blackpool back to the constituencies, to the wards, the polling districts, and to the doorsteps. Have utter confidence in the result. Strike now, keep fighting until election day, and we shall both deserve and command success.

So we left Blackpool on a high. The following week, Harold Macmillan handed over to Alec Douglas-Home as Prime Minister and leader – and the rest is history.

■ **David Hunt** went on to become a Conservative MP (1976–97) and a Cabinet Minister under both Margaret Thatcher and John Major. He was raised to the peerage as Lord Hunt of Wirral in 1997 and was appointed chairman of the Press Complaints Commission in October 2011.



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