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Towards the end of the magic circle

When ill-health compelled Harold Macmillan to resign as Conservative leader and Prime Minister in October 1963, he declared that his successor would be chosen in accordance with the party's 'customary process of consultation' (Macmillan, 1973: 506). Yet, the phrase 'customary process of consultation' implied a rather more regular and consistent procedure than what actually existed for ascertaining opinions and preferences within the Conservative Party. In fact, the actual process varied from one leadership to the next and was partly dependent on the circumstances and personalities involved. As one of Macmillan's biographers observes, the phrase implies 'precedents when none in fact existed. The leadership contests of 1911, 1923, 1940 … were all sui generis' (Thorpe, 2013: 27).

The only feature that was common to all Conservative leadership selections or appointments during the first half of the twentieth century was the absence of a formal role for Conservative MPs in their choice or preference. Instead, those most closely involved in choosing a new party leader were a few senior Conservative Party parliamentarians who consulted as narrowly or widely as they deemed expedient to do. However, the controversial manner in which Macmillan's successor was chosen in October 1963 fatally tarnished the so-called magic circle, and thus led to the adoption of a formal method for choosing subsequent Conservative leaders, entailing a secret ballot of the party's MPs.

Prior to the democratic method adopted in 1965, the Conservatives' closed and elitist mode of leadership selection reflected the party's history and organisational development, and some of the key tenets of conservatism as a philosophy. Historically, the Conservatives had mostly evolved incrementally and organically, and although 1832 is often cited as the year when the modern Conservative Party was born, its antecedents stretched back further. Even in 1832, it was only the parliamentary Conservative Party that was established; the

extra-parliamentary party was not created until 1867, when sections of the male working class were enfranchised. The party beyond parliament was titled the National Union of Conservative and Constitutional Associations (hereafter referred to as the National Union), but it was explicitly subordinate to the parliamentary party. Its role was to serve and support the Conservatives in Parliament, and it certainly had no formal role in the selection of Conservative leaders.

As such, the Conservatives made no pretence of being an internally democratic party. Instead, power was strongly concentrated in the hands of its most senior parliamentarians, both in terms of policy-making and leadership selection. For example, with regard to policy, Arthur Balfour once declared that 'I'd rather take advice from my valet than from the Conservative Party Conference.' Meanwhile, with regard to Conservative leadership selection, the Conservative MP Ernest Pretyman asserted in 1921 that:

> great leaders of parties are not elected, they are evolved … It will be a bad day for this or any other party to have solemnly to meet to elect a leader … There is no necessity, either now or at any future time, to hold a competition for the leadership of the party. (quoted in McKenzie, 1955: 34)

Such attitudes also reflected key aspects of the Conservatives' philosophy, most notably a strong belief in the virtues, or necessity, of authority, deference, empiricism, hierarchy, inequality, and wisdom derived from age and experience. These values (along with others beyond the scope of this book) not only shaped the Conservatives' approach to governing and policies, but also strongly impacted on the manner in which the party selected its leaders.

Rather than facilitating the direct involvement of Conservative MPs, or even the extra-parliamentary party, new leaders were usually selected either by an heir apparent being identified by the retiring or resigning incumbent, or by discussions among senior Conservatives on who was the best available candidate. Although the chosen one was then presented to the parliamentary Conservative Party for approval, this was a formality, as the MPs and peers were not being asked to make a choice, but to ratify the choice that had already been made or, in the case of an heir apparent, offer the party's strong approval and acclamation for the natural successor to the outgoing leader.

As such, the means by which a new Conservative leader was selected did not entail a 'customary process', but an *ad hoc* approach that depended heavily on the circumstances and personalities involved at any given juncture. In accordance with the Conservative principles identified, this 'method' reflected

the assumption that the party's elders, by virtue of their superior experience and accumulated wisdom, were best placed to gauge the leadership potential and qualities of their colleagues. The role of Conservative MPs would be that of ritual acclamation when the chosen one was announced and presented to their fellow parliamentarians. It was this mode of leadership selection which invoked the image of men in grey suits or the magic circle conjuring up a new leader prior to emerging from smoke-filled rooms to unveil their choice to the rest of the Conservative Party and the media. Even so, on a few occasions there was no choice to be made because the incumbent leaders had already made clear who their (preferred) successor would be, not least by the prestigious and prominent cabinet posts they had been awarded. That said, the leader would obviously need to be confident that their nominee would command widespread support in the rest of the parliamentary Conservative Party, although in the absence of a formal system of gauging backbench views on a leadership successor, much depended on the incumbent's judgement about the mood of the party towards the chosen one in terms of acceptability and potential for achieving (or maintaining) unity, and also how popular and respected they were among their cabinet colleagues, partly in terms of proven competence.

Pre-1945 Conservative leadership successions by an heir apparent

There were three occasions, in the first half of the twentieth century, when an heir apparent was appointed, thereby enabling a smooth transition from one leader to the next. The first such occasion was in July 1902, when Lord Salisbury's retirement led to the appointment of his nephew, Arthur Balfour, as his successor: 'Balfour's succession to the premiership was generally expected' (Blake, 1985: 167; see also Norton and Aughey, 1981: 117). After all, Salisbury had been Conservative leader for almost twenty-one years, and thus had been granted plenty of time to identify a successor, and then ensure that they occupied senior and high-profile government posts so that they were suitably qualified (in terms of ministerial experience), competent and well known. In Balfour's case, he was the Leader of the House of Commons and then First Lord of the Treasury (the latter subsequently being a title enjoyed by the prime minister). Balfour also deputised for Salisbury both at the Foreign Office and as acting prime minister when the latter was either ill or abroad on political business. Thus it was that 'the leadership in effect passed automatically from Salisbury to Balfour … without any hint of opposition or serious rivalry within the Party.' Indeed, when he was presented to a joint meeting of Conservative MPs and

peers for formal endorsement, his appointment as Conservative leader and Prime Minister was unanimously endorsed (McKenzie, 1955: 26–8).

The second occasion in the first half of the twentieth century when the Conservative leadership was passed on to an heir apparent was in 1921, when Andrew Bonar Law resigned on health grounds and was succeeded by Austen Chamberlain as leader of the party in the House of Commons. Chamberlain had 'long been regarded as heir apparent' to Bonar Law, and his magnanimous withdrawal from the 1911 leadership contest in order to avoid exacerbating intra-party divisions had subsequently enhanced the widespread respect he enjoyed among Conservative MPs (Fisher, 1977: 24; see also Dutton, 2015: 184). As such, 'his selection was a foregone conclusion,' and he was unanimously endorsed by a meeting of Conservative MPs and peers at the Carlton Club in March 1921 (Shepherd, 1991: 117; Block, 1965).

However, Chamberlain's leadership proved short-lived, for when a majority of Conservative MPs voted to withdraw from the Coalition Government (with the Liberals) in October 1922, he immediately resigned as leader of the party in the House of Commons. He had been in favour of continuing the coalition, in spite of the growing opposition to it in the parliamentary party, which he had been informed of by George Younger, the party's chair at the beginning of 1922 (Ball, 2013: 514). In the absence of an heir apparent, the King invited Bonar Law – who had by now recovered from the illness that had compelled him to resign the previous year – to resume his leadership of the Conservative Party, which he did, with the unanimous support of the parliamentary Conservative Party. However, he was again obliged to resign due to a recurrence of health problems in the following year (Blake, 1985: 204–6; Charmley, 1996: 61–2; Dutton, 2015: 190–2; Fisher, 1977: 25–6; Ramsden, 1999: 244–5; Shepherd, 1991: 120–6; Block, 1965).

The third occasion, in the first half of the twentieth century, when an heir apparent was readily acknowledged was when Neville Chamberlain succeeded Stanley Baldwin in 1937. As with Salisbury, Baldwin's lengthy (fourteen-year) tenure as Conservative Party leader and sometime Prime Minister meant that there was sufficient time for a natural successor to be promoted, with Chamberlain twice serving as Chancellor of the Exchequer (albeit the first time was short-lived, due to electoral defeat), and once as Secretary of State for Health. He also deputised for Baldwin during the summer and autumn of 1936, when the Prime Minister was suffering from nervous exhaustion. When Baldwin retired the following year, Chamberlain was 'his long pre-ordained successor' (Blake, 1985: 238). Indeed, because he was 'the inevitable

successor … The transition of power was smooth'. Not only was he Baldwin's natural and obvious successor, he had acquired 'a reputation established over nearly fifteen years for executive capacity and legislative achievement' (Ball, 2015: 215). Indeed, it has been claimed that 'his succession as Tory leader was the smoothest since Balfour's in 1902' (Shepherd, 1991: 136).

Pre-1945 Conservative leadership contests involving two candidates

On other occasions, there were at least two contenders for the leadership, as was the case in November 1911, when Balfour resigned ostensibly due to ill-health, although he was really suffering from 'boredom with the task of holding his restless Party together', with Tariff Reform being a particularly contentious and politically divisive issue in the early twentieth century (Fisher, 1977: 22). With no heir apparent, two candidates materialised, namely Austen Chamberlain and Walter Long. However, support for them was relatively evenly divided, which posed a serious risk of exacerbating tensions in the parliamentary Conservative Party, particularly as there was considerable personal animosity between them. This divisive and potentially damaging situation was compounded by the party's lack of a formal leadership (s)election procedure for choosing between two (or more) candidates. However, in this instance, even if there had been a ballot, the likely result would have been a very narrow victory of one of the contenders, which would have meant that a very large minority of Conservative MPs did not support them: a technical victory of, say, 51 per cent to 49 per cent would have posed serious problems to the authority and legitimacy of the winner.

An intra-party crisis was averted when Chamberlain and Long agreed to withdraw their candidatures in favour of Bonar Law, who was persuaded to present himself as a unity candidate, although he did so with some with reluctance, having viewed himself as a potential future leader, rather than becoming one at this juncture (Fisher, 1977: 23; see also Blake, 1985: 194; Bogdanor, 1994: 73; Charmley, 1996: 45–6; Norton and Aughey, 1981: 244; Ramsden, 1999: 215; Shepherd, 1991: 113–15; Southgate, 1977: 242; Taylor, 2015: 157–8). As we will note later, there was another occasion when a reluctant candidate was persuaded to stand in order to provide unity when the support enjoyed by other leadership contenders was matched by the strong opposition they aroused among other Conservative MPs. Having overcome his initial reticence, and been formally proposed and seconded by Chamberlain and Long themselves,

Bonar Law was unanimously endorsed as leader at a meeting of the parliamentary Conservative Party (Block, 1965).

The next occasion when there were two contenders was when ill-health compelled Bonar Law to resign in May 1923, whereupon Lord Curzon and Baldwin were acknowledged as the main rivals to fill the vacancy. Although Curzon was widely viewed as the weightier and more experienced candidate – having held the posts of Viceroy of India and Foreign Secretary, and also deputised for Bonar Law when the latter was indisposed – it was Baldwin who was actually chosen, albeit with considerable confusion and some controversy surrounding this decision. In the absence of a formal leadership (s)election procedure, the monarch, King George V, took advice via his Private Secretary from senior Conservatives over who should replace Bonar Law. The latter was apparently too ill to inform the King of his own preference, but he was thought to have supported Baldwin (who had, in 1922, been appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer by Bonar Law), and it may have been that this information was conveyed to the King via other sources (Fisher, 1977: 26–8; see also Dilks, 1977: 283–4; Ramsden, 1999: 249–50).

It was Baldwin whom the King eventually chose, a key reason being that Curzon sat in the House of Lords. The 1911 Parliament Act had effectively confirmed the constitutional supremacy of the House of Commons, and it was now widely acknowledged that a prime minister ought to be a member of the latter. It was six days after his appointment as Prime Minister before Baldwin was unanimously endorsed by a meeting of Conservative MPs and peers, with Curzon himself magnanimously moving the motion of acceptance (Block, 1965).

The final occasion during the first half of the twentieth century when there were two candidates was in May 1940, although the situation was complicated by the fact that, initially, it was a new prime minister who was sought, rather than a Conservative Party leader. The Conservative leader, Neville Chamberlain, had attempted to form a wartime coalition government to pursue Britain's military resistance to the Nazi conquest of much of mainland Europe. However, by this time, Chamberlain had lost the confidence of many Conservative MPs (who seriously doubted his ability to provide effective leadership during wartime) – 'He was no war leader, and he knew it' (Charmley, 1996: 105) – while the Labour Party was adamant that it would not enter a coalition government led by him, not least because he had previously made no secret of his personal animosity towards Labour's leadership (Ball, 2015: 230–3; Fisher, 1977: 38–45; Ramsden, 1999: 298). Thus, on 10 May 1940, Chamberlain

informed the cabinet of his decision to resign in order that someone more acceptable could lead a wartime coalition with the Labour Party (TNA, 1940).

The only two acknowledged candidates to replace Chamberlain as Prime Minister and head a coalition government were Lord Halifax and Winston Churchill. Along with much of the Conservative Party, Chamberlain favoured Halifax (who had served under him as Foreign Secretary) and the Labour Party leadership too signalled its readiness to serve in a coalition government under his leadership. Halifax himself, 'though gratified, was unenthusiastic. He thought, rightly, that he did not possess the qualities required in a war leader, and that Churchill's drive and determination made him the obvious choice' (Fisher, 1977: 46). Halifax was also concerned at the feasibility and practicability of being a prime minister who sat in the House of Lords, rather than the Commons. Although King George VI, who also favoured Halifax, wondered whether special provision could be made to allow Halifax to speak in the Commons given the gravity of the circumstances and international situation (Fisher, 1977: 49), Halifax 'categorically refused to lead a Government', which effectively meant that 'it *must* be Winston' (Colville, 1985: 121, diary entry for 10 May 1940). However, while Churchill did become Prime Minister and leader of a new wartime coalition government, Chamberlain remained leader of the Conservative Party in the House of Commons until serious illness forced him to relinquish the post in September 1940.

Churchill to Eden

It had long been widely acknowledged that Anthony Eden was Churchill's heir apparent. As far back as 1942, during the wartime Coalition Government, Churchill had, just before flying to the United States for a meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt, written to King George VI, explaining that:

> In case of my death on this journey … I avail myself of Your Majesty's gracious permission to advise that you should entrust the formation of a new Government to Mr Anthony Eden … who is in my mind the outstanding Minister in the largest political party in the House of Commons and in the National Government … and who will, I am sure, be found capable of conducting Your Majesty's affairs with the resolution, experience and capacity which these grievous times require. (quoted in James, 1987: 265)

Of course, in one major respect, Churchill was simply being prudent in informing the King who should be asked to take over as Conservative leader and prime minister in the event of the former's death, given that Britain was in the

midst of the Second World War. Yet, it was also constitutionally unusual for a prime minister to be so explicit in advising the monarch on who should head a new government in the event of the incumbent's fatality, because it might have been construed as impinging upon the Royal Prerogative, whereby the monarch formally decides whom to invite to form a new government. Certainly, in normal circumstances, a prime minister would not venture to suggest whom the monarch should appoint unless such advice was explicitly requested, but these were obviously not normal times, and Churchill himself was a unique leader.

It had presumably been part of Churchill's longer-term plan for Eden that he appointed the latter Foreign Secretary in 1940. This is one of any government's most prestigious and high-profile ministerial posts, but a position which naturally acquired even greater gravitas during a major war. Such an appointment offered Eden an enormous opportunity to enhance his authority and stature as a major political figure and future prime minister, although his sole concern at that time was pursuing political and diplomatic measures to defeat Hitler and Nazism, and thus save parliamentary democracy from totalitarianism.

When Churchill became Prime Minister again in 1951 (the Conservatives were resoundingly defeated by Labour in July 1945 and then narrowly defeated in February 1950), Eden returned to the Foreign Office, but because Churchill was by now seventy-five years old and in declining health (he suffered a number of strokes during his second premiership), it was widely assumed that he would make way for his chosen successor sooner rather than later. Indeed, following the Conservative Party's 1951 election victory, 'Eden expected … that he would succeed Churchill as Prime Minister in a matter of months' (James, 1986: 345). Yet, the following summer Churchill was informing a meeting of the Conservative Party's 1922 committee, comprising the party's backbench MPs, that it 'must trust me … I would not stay if I found I was failing physically or mentally' (Moran, 1966: 418, diary entry for 20 June 1952). A year later, while recuperating after one of the strokes he suffered during his second premiership, he alluded to his possible retirement, asserting that 'I shall do what is best for the country', before mischievously adding, 'Circumstances may convince me of my indispensability' (Moran, 1966: 448, diary entry for 3 July 1953).

Throughout his second premiership, Churchill repeatedly alluded to dates when he would resign, only to postpone his retirement as the specified date approached, and cite another one a few months in the future. In so doing, he would often claim that there was a forthcoming international summit he ought to attend, or a serious domestic policy issue whose resolution he wanted to

preside over: 'As the different dates [for his expected retirement] drew near, there were reasons, or excuses, for remaining in office' (Fisher, 1977: 67). On one occasion, Macmillan wrote to Eden suggesting it might be 'worth having another shot at getting him to go on his 80th birthday' for this would give him 'a fine end' (Macmillan, 1954).

The clear reluctance to resign was naturally a source of increasing frustration, not only for Eden, but for sundry other cabinet ministers who were concerned that Churchill was steadily becoming mentally and physically incapable of providing effective leadership: 'his life had now passed far beyond the great climacteric. His mind was as fine as ever, for short periods … he was not capable of any prolonged or detailed negotiations' (Macmillan, 1968: 536; see also Watkins, 1998: 55). Indeed, by summer 1954, an exasperated Macmillan was complaining that:

> The Government has ceased to function with full efficiency; many Ministers were unsuited to their posts; no one co-ordinated policy; Cabinets were becoming long and wearisome, as well as too frequent. The Parliamentary Party, already discontented, might soon break into groups and cabals; the whole Party machine was losing grip. All this was due to the continual uncertainty, discussed openly in the press, as to Churchill's intentions. (Macmillan, 1968: 541)

However, although cabinet ministers and sections of the parliamentary Conservative Party were growing restive over Churchill's personal equivocation and declining political leadership, there existed no formal mechanism for removing an incumbent leader. A new Conservative leader could only be selected when the incumbent died, resigned or retired, yet Churchill repeatedly refused to stand-down. The only alternative, in such circumstances, was for a senior party figure, or maybe a group of men in grey suits, to visit the party leader, and implore them to exit stage left, for the sake of the party and the country. Yet 'such was Churchill's authority and prestige that no one could challenge his continued leadership' (Fisher, 1977: 67). Eventually, in spring 1955, Churchill, either as a purely personal decision or perhaps bowing to mounting behind-the-scenes pressure, declared that 'I am going, and Anthony will succeed me. We can discuss details later' (Butler, 1971: 176). Even then, he confessed to his doctor that 'I don't want to go, but Anthony wants it [the premiership] so much' (Moran, 1966: 683, diary entry for 1 April 1955).

Yet, when Churchill visited Buckingham Palace on 5 April, to tender his resignation formally, he refrained from advising the relatively new monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, about who his successor should be. This was in accordance with established constitutional protocol, although as noted above, this

had not prevented Churchill from advising the monarch back in 1942 of who should be appointed as the Prime Minister's successor in the event of his death. Nonetheless, in 1955 there was no need for the Queen to consult or seek advice about whom she should send for to form a new government, because 'there was never any doubt about his [Eden's] right or qualification to succeed to the premiership. Throughout the fifteen years of Churchill's leadership, Eden had been acknowledged as his eventual successor.' Indeed, so widespread was this acknowledgement and acceptance by the Conservative Party, that: 'No rival candidate existed, so there was no discussion or controversy of any kind' (Fisher, 1977: 69).

Richard Austen 'Rab' Butler, whose political seniority and ministerial experience (he had served as Education Secretary in the wartime Coalition and then as Chancellor from 1951, both posts imbuing him with an experience of domestic policies which Eden lacked), might otherwise have been a likely successor to Churchill, but he fully accepted that Eden was the heir apparent: in a letter to Churchill in August 1956, Butler remarked that 'we have all accepted that Anthony is to be your successor' (Butler, 1971: 174).

As such, the official endorsement of the new leader by the wider Conservative Party, comprising MPs, peers, adopted candidates and members of the Executive Committee of the National Union (the body officially representing the extra-parliamentary party), at its meeting at Church House, Westminster, on 21 April 1955 was a formality (CPA, 1955). Churchill remarked, 'No two men ever changed guard more smoothly' (quoted in Eden, 1960: 265).

Eden to Macmillan

It was a tragic irony that after such extensive and distinguished service as Foreign Secretary, particularly during the Second World War, and having waited for more than a decade to become Prime Minister as Churchill's chosen heir, Eden's premiership lasted less than two years. The details of the Suez Canal debacle have been extensively analysed by many other writers, so we will not discuss it here; it is enough to note the unavoidable damage to Eden's authority and credibility as a consequence of Britain's 'defeat'. It is conceivable that Eden might have recovered politically in due course, and certainly, at a mid-December 1954 cabinet meeting, his ministerial colleagues urged him not to resign, but instead ride out the storm, partly because resignation would be tantamount to yielding to his critics, but more importantly because remaining as Prime Minister would actually help sustain the unity of the Conservative

Party (Fisher, 1977: 81; James, 1987: 593). However, the strain of the Suez episode had taken a serious toll on Eden's health, and the two phenomena became inextricably linked in the public mind.

He explained that 'it was not illness, but an inability to get back his ordinary vigour', which was compounded by difficulties sleeping. As a consequence, he was worried that 'he would be a Prime Minister at half-cock, and therefore unable to give a lead over the grave questions which faced us' (Kilmuir, 1964: 583–4). Indeed, so concerned was Eden about his health at this juncture that he consulted no less than three physicians, whose medical advice was sadly similar: that his health would almost certainly deteriorate if he continued, for he would place his body under too much strain (Eden, 1960: 582; see also James, 1987: 595).

In effect, the decision of whether or not to resign was taken out of Eden's hands, whereupon he informed his senior ministerial colleagues of his immediate resignation, at a specially-convened cabinet meeting on the afternoon of 9 January 1957 (TNA, 1957). Following this announcement, which seemed to surprise most of Eden's senior colleagues, Macmillan recorded that 'it became clear that Eden was a very sick man. The strain of recent weeks and months has told on him terribly' (Catterall, 2004: 612, diary entry for 3 February 1957). Lord Salisbury (Lord President of the Council) and Lord Kilmuir (Lord Chancellor) elicited the views of the cabinet by jointly interviewing each minister about their choice of successor. The process was conducted by these two cabinet members primarily because they were peers, and were not, therefore, potential leadership contenders themselves. This would presumably ensure that the probity of the process was beyond reproach. The two peers then reported the results of their survey to the Queen.

As there were only two contenders, the question was, in effect, 'Who is it to be – Rab (Butler) or Harold (Macmillan)?', to which the vast majority of ministers answered 'Harold' (James, 1987: 599). There were no formal consultations with the wider Conservative Party, either in Parliament or in the constituencies, and 'such information as was sought from these quarters was random, although several [MPs] did telephone to give their opinion to the Whips' when they heard of Eden's resignation (Catterall, 2004: 612, diary entry for 3 February 1957). To the extent that the views of Conservative MPs were made known, they too clearly preferred Macmillan, as did Churchill, who was summoned by the Queen – as an elder statesman of vast experience and stature – to proffer his 'independent' advice (Kilmuir, 1964: 285, 286; see also Catterall, 2004: 612, diary entry for 3 February 1957).

Looking back, Kilmuir judged that this process worked extremely well in 1957. Indeed, he was highly dismissive of the notion that a party leader (and prime minister) could or should be directly elected by the wider party. He advanced two objections to a system of intra-party democracy in selecting a leader. The first was that in undertaking a public election, a party 'might discredit itself if there were a contested election, with all its probable attendant intrigue, lobbying, and personal animosity.' The second objection was more constitutional in character; Kilmuir argued that intra-party leadership election contests would 'seriously limit the prerogative of the Crown' because 'the Sovereign … could only invite an individual proposed … as a result of a party vote' (Kilmuir, 1964: 288).

At this stage, the wider Conservative Party was not formally consulted for two reasons. The first was that in the circumstances, time was of the essence, for it was vital that the Queen should be able to summon Eden's successor to Buckingham Palace to kiss hands as quickly as possible. Had Eden's health not necessitated such a swift departure, there might have been time for a more extensive process of consultation with the Conservative Party beyond the cabinet. The second reason for confining the main consultations to cabinet ministers was that these were the people who were best placed to judge the qualities of their senior ministerial colleagues. Moreover, they were the ones who would have to work most closely, on a day-to-day basis, with whoever was chosen.

However, contrary to Kilmuir's sanguine view about how smoothly the leadership selection process and transition was conducted in 1957, it was not entirely without dissent and demurral. Not only had some commentators expected Butler to succeed Eden as 'he was the more obvious candidate,' having served as Chancellor, and also deputised for Eden when the latter had been ill (Punnett, 1992: 35, 36), but there was also some unease at the fact that Macmillan became Prime Minister less than twenty-four hours after Eden's announcement that he was resigning, with Butler himself observing that the process was rushed (Butler, 1971: 195; see also Butler, 1992: 65–6; *Daily Telegraph*, 1957).

These two criticisms are readily rejected. Support in the parliamentary Conservative Party for Butler was outweighed by the opposition to his potential leadership, both on personal and policy grounds, it being alleged that he 'had a peculiar flair for arousing Tory hostility, and … for not rising to the occasion' (Sampson, 1967: 124). Or as Blake expressed it, 'Butler had a reputation for equivocation, ambivalence and delphic utterance' (Blake, 1985: 278; see also Shepherd, 1991: 147–8).

As for the alacrity of Macmillan's appointment, the widespread support he enjoyed in the cabinet, as expressed on 9 January, rendered a longer, more extensive process of intra-party consultation unnecessary. Consequently, in spite of the isolated quibbles over the manner of Macmillan's succession to Eden, there was no real questioning of the continued efficacy of the magic circle as the most appropriate means of choosing a new Conservative leader. Ironically, it was because of the controversial manner in which Macmillan's own successor was chosen six years later that the magic circle was acknowledged to be no longer fit for the purpose, thus compelling the Conservative Party to devise a more formal and transparent method for choosing its leaders.

Macmillan to Home

During the summer and early autumn of 1963, there was a growing feeling at all levels of the Conservative Party that its prospects in the next general election, due by October 1964 at the latest, might be significantly enhanced if it had a new leader. Certainly, Conservative Central Office received numerous letters or other reports from constituency parties urging a change of leader before the next general election. For example, a letter from the secretary of the Bradford constituency party advised that 'there is a widespread feeling in this Party … that there should be change of P.M. before the next election,' with this being 'the view of almost 100 per cent of the younger element of the Party' (Lee, 1963). Similarly, Evelyn Emmett, the Conservative MP for East Grinstead reported that although her local party members were highly supportive of Macmillan in the current situation (the repercussions of the sex scandal involving Secretary of State for War John Profumo), and also very appreciative of what he had achieved during his premiership, 'support disappears' when the question is asked of whether he should lead the party into the next general election. Instead, there was a general view that he ought to retire in the next few months, and thereby enable a younger leader to succeed him, and again, this view was particularly prevalent among younger party members in the constituency (Emmett, 1963).

It was also reported that much of the parliamentary Conservative Party shared these views. Quite apart from the political ramifications of the Profumo scandal, various policy decisions had upset some Conservative MPs, most notably the 1961 decision to apply for membership of the European Economic Community (EEC), which had been strongly opposed by about 30 per cent of the parliamentary party, and the 1961 Pay Pause imposed by Chancellor

Selwyn Lloyd. There was also growing unease on the backbenches due to by-election defeats suffered by the Conservative Party in the early 1960s, most notable of which was the loss of Orpington in March 1962. The growing discontent in the parliamentary party was, Lord Poole explained, exacerbated by its particular character and composition at this time, both 'because of the number of ex-ministers and ex-junior ministers on the back benches', and also because of 'the number of inexperienced members who got in in 1959 with small majorities … some of whom can hardly be expected to hold their seats'. These factors meant that: 'The Parliamentary Party is more difficult to handle than in previous parliaments.' In view of the unease on the backbenches, it was deemed likely that the Government's Chief Whip, and also the chair of the 1922 Committee, would 'advise you that the Parliamentary Party wish for a change [of leader] before the next election'. Whatever Macmillan decided, whether to remain or resign, Poole urged him to make his intentions known as soon as possible, so that the uncertainty and speculation could be quelled, and the government could regain the political initiative (Poole, 1963).

Similar advice emanated from a cabinet discussion – from which Macmillan naturally absented himself – about the current political situation and speculation about the Prime Minister's intentions. The cabinet's view was that whether Macmillan decided to stay or to go, his decision should be announced at the annual conference the following week. There was no indication, though, that the cabinet wanted him to relinquish the leadership at this stage; if he decided to stay and contest the following year's general election, most of the cabinet would fully support him – although there might be 'some internal strains in the Party in the House'. However, 'these stresses' could be overcome if the cabinet provided a clear display of unity (Marples, 1963).

Macmillan contemplated his political future, wondering whether to lead the Conservatives into the next general election, due the following year, or to resign at the beginning of 1964 in the hope that a clear successor would have been established who would then be able to choose the date of the next election themselves. However, upon further reflection, Macmillan thought that if he was to resign, it would be better to do so before the new parliamentary session due to commence at the end of October, rather than endure 'a tiresome eight weeks from November to Christmas, with [the] Party in the House of Commons making trouble, and then resigning at Christmas … the extra two months are not worth the trouble' (Macmillan, 1973: 491, diary entry for 16 August 1963). This though, would present two problems. First, it would be too soon for a 'natural' successor to have been identified, whereupon 'I should leave the Party in

complete disarray – with some for Butler, some for [Lord] Hailsham, some for [Reginald] Maudling' (Macmillan, 1973: 499, diary entry for 7 October 1963).

The second problem about retiring before the imminent parliamentary session was that the announcement would, in effect, have to be made at the Conservatives' annual conference in early October, and this would inevitably have meant that proceedings would be almost completely overshadowed by speculation and manoeuvrings concerning Macmillan's successor. Every public appearance and peroration would be scrutinised for possible clues or coded messages about either the speaker's own possible candidature or their perceived preference about who should succeed Macmillan. The whole character and conduct of the conference would be negatively affected.

In spite of these two objections, Macmillan deemed there to be two main arguments in favour of an autumn resignation, one of which was the decade's growing emphasis on 'youth … there was little respect for age', which might prove disadvantageous given that Macmillan would be seventy in 1964. Macmillan acknowledged that Churchill had been somewhat older, but had been 'unique'. Certainly, Macmillan did not want to be thought of as 'just clinging on … [like] a limpet' (Macmillan, 1973: 494, diary entry for 18 September 1963).

The other factor cited by Macmillan in support of an autumn resignation was the imminent publication of Lord Denning's official report into the Profumo scandal, in which the Secretary of State for War had pursued an affair with Christine Keeler, who was already in a relationship with a Russian diplomat at the Soviet Embassy (this being the era of the Cold War). This major misdemeanour and potential security risk was compounded by Profumo subsequently lying to Parliament over the episode, having initially denied, in the House of Commons, his relationship with Keeler. Macmillan was concerned that if he continued as Prime Minister, there was the risk that he would 'go down in history as a Prime Minister who had been drowned by the flood of filth which had seeped up from the sewers of London' (Macmillan, 1973: 492).

On the other hand, Macmillan felt a moral and political responsibility to deal with the imminent Denning Report, which thus precluded an October resignation as Prime Minister. As the Profumo affair had occurred under his premiership – although he had nothing to reproach himself for – Macmillan recognised that it would be unfair to let a successor deal with the forthcoming report. The honourable course of action would be to respond to the report and then resign at the beginning of 1964. This, though, still left Macmillan with the dilemma of whether to defer announcing his resignation until January

or February 1964 (not announcing his intention to resign would avoid confusion and speculation about who would succeed him, and would also prevent perceptions or allegations that he was now a lame duck prime minister) or to announce, in advance, his intention to resign at the start of the New Year, in order that a successor could be identified and appointed in readiness for January or February 1964, thereby facilitating a smooth and orderly transition (Catterall, 2011: 597, diary entry for 21 September 1963; Horne, 1989: 533–4).

Yet, even while grappling with the dilemma of when to announce his resignation, Macmillan was at times inclined to remain as Conservative leader for at least another couple of years, which would have meant leading the party into the 1964 general election and, if victorious, a year or two beyond (Swinton, 1965). Part of this temptation to stay on was due to the strong support he received both from the Queen and most his cabinet colleagues, who expressed sorrow at the prospect of his resignation at this stage, but Macmillan was also vexed that 'there is *no* clear successor' (Macmillan, 1973: 497, diary entry for 6 October 1963, emphasis in original). Evidently at this stage, Macmillan (like most people) did not envisage Alec Douglas-Home as a potential successor.

Macmillan finally decided, on the night of 7 October 1963, not to resign, but instead to lead the Conservative Party through to the 1964 general election and possibly beyond. Macmillan informed the cabinet of this decision the following morning, albeit after a night of extreme pain caused by a serious prostate problem which manifested itself at this time. Macmillan was obliged to leave the cabinet on a couple of occasions due to recurring painful spasms, after which doctors agreed that immediate surgery was necessary. By this time, a pain-stricken Macmillan had to concede that his diminished health now precluded him from remaining Conservative leader; the decision to resign had effectively been taken out of his hands. Even if the surgery proved successful, he acknowledged, he would need a lengthy period of convalescence, and this would prevent him from leading the party in the imminent election campaign (Horne, 1989: 542–4, diary entry for 8 October 1963; see also Blake, 1985: 290–1; Catterall, 2011: 604–5, diary entry for 9 October 1963; Shepherd, 1991: 152). Macmillan thus called for the 'customary process of consultation' (as noted earlier) to be instigated.

In so doing, he alluded to concerns in some quarters that the consultation process invoked when he himself replaced Eden as Conservative leader (and prime minister) had been too narrow (Horne, 1989: 555; see also Shepherd, 1991: 155). Macmillan thus devised his own procedure for intra-party consultations over his successor, wherein Lord Dilhorne (the Lord Chancellor) would elicit

the views of cabinet ministers, Martin Redmayne (Government Chief Whip in the House of Commons) would ascertain the preferences of Conservative MPs and junior (non-cabinet) ministers, Lord St. Aldwyn (Government Chief Whip in the House of Lords) would consult Conservative peers, and Poole (co-chair of the Conservative Party), along with Dame Margaret Shepherd (chair of the National Union) and Lord Chelmer (chair of the Executive Committee of the National Union), would consult representatives of the extra-parliamentary party (Macmillan Papers, 1963b).

To forestall or pre-empt any subsequent complaints about this process, Macmillan also secured cabinet approval for it (albeit in his absence, Butler chaired the meeting), thereby ensuring that senior ministers were collectively responsible for the comprehensive consultation procedure which would yield his successor, and their imminent leader and prime minister (Macmillan, 1973: 510, diary entry for 15 October 1963). However, because of the timing of Macmillan's sudden illness, which was just before the Conservatives' annual conference, there was insufficient time to undertake this consultation process before the party's delegates met in Blackpool. Consequently, when the conference was informed of Macmillan's imminent resignation, the sundry speeches by various ministers acquired heightened significance because some of them now had a particular interest in impressing those attending; an especially good performance on the platform might significantly enhance their leadership prospects.

In fact, on the eve of the conference, while he had been in hospital for his prostate operation, Macmillan had – to the understandable concern of his doctors, who wanted him to rest and recuperate – been visited by a succession of ministers and other senior Conservative figures. While they naturally wanted to convey their respects to Macmillan, and wish him a speedy recovery, he treated these well-wishing visits as an opportunity to discuss the future leadership of the Conservative Party. It was during a visit by Hailsham, who had already received reports over the summer that he was the Prime Minister's chosen heir, that Macmillan confirmed his preference for the former to succeed him (Hailsham, 1990: 348, 350).

Some Conservatives lamented that the announcement of Macmillan's impending resignation had a deleterious impact on conference proceedings, for according to Butler, it effectively 'turned Blackpool into a sort of electoral convention *á l'Americaine*. After that there was no peace' (Butler, 1971: 242). Hailsham's conduct caused the most consternation, because his apparent over-exuberance at being Macmillan's imminent successor was widely interpreted

as hubristic and undignified, and therefore fuelled doubts about his political acumen. As such, Hailsham's conduct at Blackpool proved counter-productive, and fatally damaged his chances of becoming party leader, for he behaved in an 'opportunistic manner which offended the party's sense of propriety' (Campbell, 1993: 143). However, Hailsham himself insisted, to Macmillan, that 'he was not conscious of having done anything unusual', and argued that much of the alleged controversy was due to manner in which the press and television had reported the proceedings (Macmillan Papers, 1963a). The offence this caused was compounded by the conduct of some of his supporters in the Young Conservatives, who ostentatiously distributed rosettes displaying the letter 'Q' (for Quintin, his Christian name), which many older Conservatives deemed distasteful, if not downright vulgar. Even Macmillan, having read and received reports of the conference proceedings, lamented that Hailsham 'had foolishly yielded to this excitement … was in a state of hysteria … and generally behaving in a very strange way' (Macmillan Papers, 1963b).

Such was the concern over Hailsham's conduct at conference that Kilmuir informed Macmillan that 'members of the Cabinet … would be less and less willing to serve under Lord Hailsham' (Macmillan Papers, 1963b) Meanwhile, Home confessed that he had been alarmed by Hailsham's conduct at Blackpool. Initially, he had attributed Hailsham's behaviour to 'a man being a show-off', but he subsequently concluded that 'it was because the person concerned was actually mad at the time … he had not been able to control himself.' Moreover, Home claimed that Hailsham was widely viewed as right wing, which would mean he would 'lose some votes on the Left'. For these reasons, Home declared that he would be willing to be considered as a leadership contender, if the Prime Minister considered him acceptable, 'in order to prevent the Party from collapsing' (Macmillan Papers, 1963c). Ironically, in a separate meeting later the same afternoon, Hailsham informed Macmillan that the notion of Home becoming Conservative leader 'would be absurd' (Macmillan, 1963d). Yet shortly after Hailsham's bilateral with Macmillan, Edward Heath informed the Prime Minister that neither Hailsham nor Butler would be suitable as leader, whereas Home would provide the best prospect of uniting the parliamentary Conservative Party, which was otherwise at increasing risk of several internal divisions.

Given Hailsham's conduct in Blackpool and the subsequent doubts about his leadership qualities which even some of his erstwhile admirers now harboured, Macmillan no longer felt able to endorse him. Indeed, Macmillan was concerned that Hailsham's volatility could actually be deeply damaging

in the realm of international affairs, where diplomacy and patience were vital qualities: 'there is a real sense of alarm lest under the tremendous stress of world politics, Lord Hailsham would not be able to remain sufficiently calm to handle the kind of situation which only too frequently arises' (Macmillan, 1963e). However, Macmillan was also opposed to Butler succeeding him, for although he readily acknowledged the latter's intellectual skills and political experience, he noted that there were many in the party who viewed him as 'a dreary figure' who would struggle to inspire either his parliamentary colleagues or 'floating' voters (Macmillan, 1963e).

The Prime Minister himself also turned his attention to Home. Like many in the party, he had not previously viewed Home as a leadership contender, not because of his unsuitability *per se*, but because Home had not intimated any willingness to be considered, hence discussions and speculation had hitherto been about the most likely or well-known leadership contenders, namely Butler, Hailsham and Maudling. Lord Home's expression of interest – or, at least, willingness to offer his services if called upon to do so, 'as a compromise candidate, for unity' (Macmillan, 1973: 515, diary entry for 18 October 1963) – suddenly meant that an alternative candidate was now available who could unite the party.

One other external development of a major constitutional character also unexpectedly transformed Home into a leadership contender: the 1963 Peerage Act. Hitherto, hereditary peers could not renounce their titles and could not, therefore, become MPs. Or, if they were already an MP, they could not remain so if they subsequently inherited a title. This latter scenario occurred in 1961, when Anthony 'Tony' Wedgwood Benn's father, Viscount Stansgate, died and Benn acquired the title, very much against his wishes. In so doing, he was obliged to cease being an MP, a constitutional requirement which he bitterly resented. Benn pursued a legal challenge against the rule and it was largely as a consequence of his case that the 1963 Life Peerage Act was passed, allowing hereditary peers to renounce their titles and become (or remain) commoners, thus enabling them to sit in the House of Commons as MPs (for an account of the 1963 Life Peerage Act, see Dorey and Kelso, 2011: ch. 4).

Although Benn was intended to be the immediate beneficiary of the right of renunciation bestowed by the Peerage Act, two Conservative peers also greatly benefitted at the time: Hailsham and Home, for either could now renounce their title and seek election as an MP if selected as Conservative leader. It was not actually an explicit requirement for Conservative leaders to sit in the House of Commons, but it had become a convention, with Salisbury having been the

last Conservative to serve as leader (and prime minister) while sitting in the House of Lords (his premiership ended in 1902). Thereafter, it was accepted that as the House of Commons was the elected chamber, it was highly desirable for reasons of both principle and practicability that Conservative leaders should be recruited from the Commons; it was not considered feasible for Conservative MPs to be led by someone who sat in the other House.

In response to the unease occasioned by the conduct of Hailsham and some of his more exuberant, often younger, supporters at the party's 1963 conference, coupled with a perception that he was on the party's right, many other Conservative ministers and MPs followed Macmillan in transferring their support to Home once the latter had intimated his willingness to be considered as a candidate for the party leadership, buoyed by the knowledge that he could now renounce his peerage and seek election as an MP, if chosen. Indeed, when Macmillan was informed of the results of the consultation process, Home was deemed the most popular choice at all levels of the parliamentary party. In the cabinet itself, it was reported that ten ministers had opted for Home, compared to four for Maudling, three for Butler and two for Hailsham (Dilhorne, 1963). Macmillan noted the extent to which

> practically all of these Ministers … whether Hoggites or Butlerites or Maudlingites, agreed that if Lord Home would undertake the task of P. M., the whole Cabinet and the whole Party would cheerfully unite under him. (Macmillan, 1973: 513, diary entry for 16 October 1963)

Yet, Randolph Churchill claimed that 'originally, there had been six adherents of Butler and six of Hailsham' in the cabinet, although neither he, nor anyone else, cited the original survey, or indicated when it was supposed to have been conducted (Churchill, 1964: 133). It was this type of opacity which partly fuelled subsequent concerns and controversy about the veracity of the consultation process, and ultimately led to the adoption of a formal system of election for Conservative leaders, as discussed in the next chapter (see, for example, Iain Macleod's review in the *Spectator* of Randolph Churchill's book on the 1963 leadership contest, which was published just a few weeks later, Macleod, 1964: 65–7).

Incidentally, ten years later, when Macmillan published the last of his six-volume political memoirs (the volume which addressed the 1963 leadership issue), Enoch Powell reviewed it for the *Spectator*, and recalled that no less than eight cabinet ministers had expressly favoured Butler, whereas Macmillan claimed that only three did so. Lest his readers thought that Powell's memory

was faulty or fading due to the ten years which had elapsed, he explained that he had recorded the figures at the time and deposited them with his bank, to be retrieved at an appropriate time or occasion in the future, or even after his death (Powell, 1973: 481).

Meanwhile, In the House of Commons, Conservative MPs, along with junior ministers, expressed their first choice as follows:

Home – 87
Butler – 86
Hailsham – 65
Maudling – 48
Macleod – 12
Heath – 10

However, the MPs and non-cabinet ministers were also asked further questions, one of these being which of the candidates did they have a 'definite aversion' to, the answer to which was:

Home – 30
Butler – 48
Hailsham – 78
Maudling – 6
Macleod – 1
Heath – 1

It was apparent that although Butler and Hailsham enjoyed strong support in some sections of the party, with Butler having been the only one vote behind Home when Conservative parliamentarians had expressed their first choice, this was matched by strong opposition from other Conservative MPs. Indeed, in Hailsham's case, this opposition rather exceeded the support he attracted. Meanwhile, although thirty MPs and junior ministers expressed a 'definite aversion' to Home becoming leader, this was clearly far fewer than those clearly opposing Butler and Hailsham.

Home was also the second or third choice of a plurality of Conservative MPs and junior ministers:

Home – 89
Butler – 69

Hailsham – 39
Maudling – 66
Macleod – 18
Heath – 17

These figures were then interpreted as evidence that, overall, Home was the most popular candidate, even though his lead was 'sometimes very narrow'. However, Redmayne added that:

> Apart from Home's actual lead, I am impressed by the general goodwill shown towards him, even by those who give reasons in favour of other candidates, and I cannot fail to come to the conclusion that he would best be able to secure united support. (Redmayne, 1963a)

Redmayne also suggested that, with regard to Home's lead, 'account must be taken of the uncertainty about his intentions', the implication being that more MPs would probably have declared their support for him had they been sure that he was definitely a leadership contender (Redmayne, 1963a). At a meeting with Macmillan the following day, Redmayne claimed that it was 'perfectly clear in my mind that Home would be the MP [sic] most likely to secure the widest support of the Party' (Macmillan Papers, 1963f).

Meanwhile, in the House of Lords, twenty-eight Conservative peers reportedly declared Home to be their first choice, compared to fourteen in favour of Butler, ten for Hailsham and just two for Maudling (St. Aldwyn, 1963). Only Conservative constituency party members failed to proffer support for Home, instead dividing 60:40 for Hailsham and Butler respectively, albeit 'with *strong* opposition feelings to both' (Macmillan, 1973: 514, diary entry for 17 October 1963, emphasis in original). However, as Poole pointed out to Macmillan, Conservative constituency members were unaware of Home's potential candidature when their views were elicited: 'Home would have been second if they had known he was running' (it is not clear on what empirical basis Poole made this claim) (Macmillan Papers, 1963f).

After a final meeting in the afternoon of 17 October 1963 with those who had formally undertaken the 'soundings' of the various sections of the Conservative Party, Macmillan wrote that it: 'Looks on the advice it will be probably Home.' When he conveyed this advice to the Queen that evening, Macmillan emphasised that throughout the Conservative Party, those whose first choice was one of the other leadership candidates invariably preferred Home as the alternative: 'he seems to be the second choice of everybody … Everyone seems to think he

has all the [requisite] qualities.' Macmillan thus advised the Queen to invite Home to form a government, emphasising that if she did so, she 'would be held to have chosen a man generally supported by all the various sections to whom a Minister must look for the support of his administration' (Macmillan Papers, 1963g).

According to Randolph Churchill's account, published as a book within weeks of the contest:

> Never in the history of the Tory Party, or indeed of any other British political party, have such full and diligent enquiries been made in the selection of a new leader. This was no decision made in a 'smoke-filled room'. Everyone in the party had an opportunity to make his or her views felt, and the result of the canvas had been decisive. There was no election, no precise counting of noses! It was Tory Democracy in action. (Churchill, 1964: 134)

Yet, in stark contrast to Salisbury's eulogisation of the consultation process, Home's selection as Conservative leader subsequently proved controversial for two reasons. The first was that, although he was viewed as a unity candidate, he nonetheless aroused strong opposition from some Conservatives who believed that he inadvertently perpetrated an out-of-touch 'tweeds and grouse-shooting' image of the party in an increasingly meritocratic and modern Britain. A flavour of this criticism was conveyed in a letter sent to Central Office towards the end of 1963, from an industrialist and hitherto Conservative voter who complained that the party was dominated by 'too many Etonians'. The correspondent added that life-long Conservatives like himself were 'sick of seeing old-looking men dressed in flat-caps and bedraggled tweeds, strolling with a 12-bore [shot-gun]' (quoted in Ramsden, 1980: 225). As one Conservative backbencher observed (albeit not personally endorsing the perception), 'there is a considerable section of the middle-class vote which is jealous of the power which is still wielded by the old and aristocratic families,' and which feels that 'many people in the Government are there by relationship or connection. This feeling … has been accentuated by recent events' (Glyn, 1963).

A further reason why some Conservatives expressed criticism of Home's appointment was that it was tantamount to acknowledging that 'we were proposing to admit that, after twelve years of Tory government, no-one amongst the 363 members of the Party in the House of Commons was acceptable as Prime Minister' (Macleod, 1964: 5).

The second, and more substantive, reason why Home's appointment proved controversial was due to the grave doubts which immediately emerged about

the process by which he had been selected, as many Conservative MPs were deeply sceptical about the degree of support which he actually enjoyed in the party. Indeed, in praising the process which had yielded Home, Randolph Churchill had boasted that there had been 'no precise counting of noses'. That, critics in the party complained, was precisely why the customary process of consultation was now in disrepute and discredited. There were deep concerns about the manner in which the choice of candidates had been presented to respondents, the interpretation of the responses and the weighting ascribed to the stated preferences of different individuals in the Conservative Party.

One of the key criticisms was the manner in which Home's candidature was presented when Conservatives were asked whom they would support as Macmillan's successor and how their responses were interpreted. For example, James Prior (who had first been elected in 1959, and many years later was a cabinet minister in the first two Thatcher Governments) recalled that after he had expressed his preference for Maudling and was about to depart, the following exchange occurred:

> Chief Whip: 'By the way, what about Alec if he decides to stand?'
> Prior: 'I don't really know him, and in any case, he's in the House of Lords.'
> Chief Whip: 'So he's not a runner?'
> Prior: 'Well, we don't know do we?'
> Chief Whip: 'But if he does renounce?'
> Prior: 'I suppose he would be possible.'

In recounting this, Prior (1986: 32–3) strongly suspected that 'even at that early stage, I was put down as an Alec supporter'. Elsewhere, John Hare, the Minister of Labour, informed Macmillan that his preference would be for Hailsham, but he conceded that many in the party were strongly opposed to him, especially after his conduct at the Conservatives' conference: 'He is not always in control of himself when he speaks.' Consequently, Hare confessed that he would be 'quite satisfied if Lord Home is chosen' (Macmillan Papers, 1963h). Meanwhile, Lloyd thought that either Butler or Hailsham would prove to be excellent Conservative leaders and prime ministers, but suggested that:

> if there was any question of a deep rift within the Party between the Hoggites [Hailsham supporters] and Butlerites, the unity of the Party was much more important than any other question – in which case there was a lot to be said for Lord Home. (Macmillan Papers, 1963i)

Unease was exacerbated when the Chief Whip confessed that the opinions of some people had been ascribed greater weight 'since in every organisation,

there must be people whose opinion one would more strongly rely on than others' (Redmayne, 1963b: 1013). Indeed, when he had informed Macmillan of the views and preferences of Conservative MPs and junior ministers in mid-October, Redmayne had not only counted the support for each contender in a purely quantitative manner, but had 'carefully studied the quality of support given', which reaffirmed his view that Home was the best candidate in terms of breadth of support and thus potential for fostering party unity (Redmayne, 1963a). As such, although Randolph Churchill claimed that 'everyone in the party had an opportunity to make his or her views felt,' it subsequently became clear that some views were treated more seriously than others (Churchill, 1964: 134; see also Ramsden, 1999: 378; Renton, 2004: 310–11; Shepherd, 1991: 155–7; Thorpe, 1996: 344).

The leadership selection process was further discredited by suspicions and, indeed, claims that Macmillan not only favoured Home (having initially wanted Hailsham to succeed him), but was actually determined to ensure that Home became leader. According to Heath, 'Macmillan informed me that that he favoured Home, and asked me to use all my whipping skills to ensure that Alec became leader' (Heath, 1998: 256). In a similar vein, Douglas Hurd recalled that 'Macmillan was sewing it up in the background … the Chief Whip's exercise … was designed to have the effect of playing into the hands of Alec Home' (Hurd, 2012: 190). Macmillan's apparent determination to ensure Home's victory over Butler and Hailsham would clearly account for the manner in which MPs, ministers and peers were questioned about their preferences, not merely being asked who they favoured as Conservative leader, but also who they strongly opposed and who they thought would constitute a good second choice or unity candidate if the declared first choices revealed marked intra-party divisions.

The loss of the 1964 general election was instrumental in effecting a change in the Conservative party's method of selecting its leaders. Those Conservatives who had warned that Home's age and social background would prove an electoral liability were deemed to have been vindicated, although his leadership was certainly not the only factor contributing to the Conservatives' defeat after thirteen years in office. Nonetheless, there was a widespread recognition that a new (younger, less aristocratic, more dynamic) leader, was needed – as was a new, more transparent, method of choosing Conservative leaders.

Devising new leadership selection rules

Due to controversy that surrounded his appointment, Home 'came to the conclusion that, with all its disadvantages, it was necessary to adopt a system of election of a leader' in order to ensure that throughout the process, 'everything was seen to be open and above board' (Home, 1976: 218). Or as Norman St. John-Stevas expressed it, 'justice must be seen to be done, as well as done,' something which had not been evident to many outside observers during the 1963 leadership contest. On the contrary, although no blame could be apportioned to Home himself, his selection had been perceived by critics as unfair, and the Conservative Party had been 'badly damaged by that perception' (St. John-Stevas, 1964).

In fact, several months before Home's selection, a Conservative MP, Humphry Berkeley, had suggested that Conservative leaders be elected by the party's MPs, but found that 'this proposal was treated with ridicule' (Berkeley, 1972: 28). Undeterred, and in response to Home's appointment, Berkeley wrote a letter to the *Times*, arguing that the extant method had proven to be 'utterly inadequate', and reiterated his call for a more formal and transparent system of choosing Conservative leaders, 'a procedure which avoids both secret manipulation and mass participation'. What he envisaged was 'a small electoral college, in which [Conservative] Members of Parliament predominated' (Berkeley 1972: 30). Then, at the beginning of 1964, Berkeley wrote to Home directly, claiming that, on the basis of conversations with Conservative MPs and ministers, there was 'a widespread view that we should not continue with the present system' of choosing the party's leader and as such, he urged Home to consider establishing a small committee to consider the matter and examine the options. Home replied that he 'not averse to the idea of a private study of the methods which might be used on some future occasion', but believed that such an inquiry should be deferred until after the general election, which had to be held that year (Berkeley, 1972: 150).

After the Conservative Party's defeat in that year's election, which some critics partly attributed to Home's leadership and image (compared to the younger and seemingly more dynamic Labour leader, Harold Wilson), an intra-party committee was duly established to examine options for (s)electing future Conservative leaders, although there remained reservations about democratisation, because 'it opens the way to lobbying, log-rolling, public attitudes, and strong public canvassing of personalities which can leave wounds' (Block, 1963). It should be emphasised that there is no evidence to suggest that this committee

was appointed in direct response to Berkeley's exhortations; it would almost certainly have been established regardless, and it is notable that Berkeley was not appointed as a member. Instead, the fifteen members (and their roles or official positions) were:

Sir Alec Douglas-Home – chair
Sir William Anstruther-Gray – chair of the 1922 Committee
Lord Blakenham – chair of the Conservative Party
Rab Butler – leadership contender in 1963, and Foreign Secretary 1963–4
Lord Carrington – Conservative leader in the House of Lords
Lord Chelmer – chair of the National Executive Committee of the National
    Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations
Lord Dilhorne – Conservative deputy leader in the House of Lords
James Douglas – senior official, Conservative Research Department
Michael Fraser – deputy chair of the Conservative Party
Lord Hailsham – leadership contender in 1963
Selwyn Lloyd – former chancellor, and leader of the House of Commons
    1963–64
Iain Macleod – leadership contender in 1963, and shadow chancellor from
    October 1964
Martin Redmayne – Conservative (Government) Chief Whip until October
    1964
Lord St. Aldwyn – Conservative Chief Whip in the House of Lords
William Whitelaw – Conservative (Government) Chief Whip from October
    1964

This naturally prompted debates and proposals concerning four aspects of potential leadership election methods: how candidates would be selected, who would be entitled to vote, which electoral system should be adopted and what margin of victory should be required in order to constitute an effective majority. Of course, many of these four aspects were closely related.

Nominating leadership contenders

The issue of candidate nomination actually entailed two considerations: who would be entitled to nominate leadership contenders and how much support would such nominations require. The first consideration reflected divergent views about whether Conservative MPs only should be permitted to nominate

leadership candidates or whether the extra-parliamentary party should also be entitled to do so. With regard to the latter, one particular proposal was that the three sections of the party beyond the House of Commons – Conservative peers, Conservative candidates (adopted for the next general election) and the individuals serving on the Executive Committee of the National Union – would be invited to nominate MPs. Any MP who received at least 25 per cent of the nominations from any of these three sections of the Conservative Party would be placed on the shortlist presented to MPs for a vote. The 25 per cent threshold was intended to yield a reasonable choice of candidates, while preventing seemingly maverick nominations from reaching the shortlist.

Of course, while this would provide the party outside Parliament with a significant input into the leadership selection process, it would also come with the risk that it might nominate candidates who would be considered unsuitable by many of the party's MPs, notwithstanding the 25 per cent threshold. If and when those MPs then consistently ignored or rejected these nominations, and instead only voted for candidates who had been nominated by their parliamentary colleagues, the extra-parliamentary party would almost certainly feel aggrieved, and perhaps view its own participation as a sop or a sham. Ultimately, the committee agreed that the actual nomination of leadership candidates should be confined to the party's MPs, as these were the people who were best able to judge the potential leadership qualities of their colleagues in the House of Commons.

Entitlement to vote

Naturally, once candidates had been nominated, the question was who would be entitled to vote. Once again, there were two general perspectives or options: either the ballot should be confined solely and wholly to Conservative MPs, but with the extra-parliamentary party entitled formally to endorse this choice (which it effectively did under the erstwhile system of leadership selection) or the extra-parliamentary party should also be granted a meaningful role in electing the leader. The argument in favour of limiting the ballot to Conservative MPs was (as with the actual nomination) that these were the people who directly knew the candidates, having worked alongside them, often for many years or even decades, and were therefore best placed to judge their personal qualities and thus their leadership potential. Conversely, if a significant electoral role was granted to Conservatives beyond the House of Commons, there was a significant risk that they might vote for a leader who was not widely or

strongly supported by the party's MPs. This would have serious implications for Conservative cohesion and unity in the House of Commons, and the party's erstwhile supreme skill at practicing statecraft. Incidentally, the case for confining the ballot to Conservative MPs only was cogently expressed in the memorandum submitted by Berkeley (Berkeley, 1964).

In spite of this concern, there was a general recognition that the party beyond the House of Commons ought to be granted some role in Conservative leadership elections. Carrington warned that 'a good deal of ill-feeling could be caused if they [Conservative peers] had a very small representation, especially amongst those who were ex-MPs,' while Dilhorne was equally adamant that the extra-parliamentary party ought to have an 'effective voice' too (CPA, 1964). There was concern that if Conservative peers and/or the wider party membership were given a significantly smaller input than MPs, this might be construed as a 'token derogatory role' (Douglas, 1965).

A key reason advanced for granting more than merely a token role to the extra-parliamentary party was that while the leader's most important and obvious role was leading the party in the House of Commons (and *inter alia* serving as prime minister when the Conservatives were in government), they also formally led the party outside the House of Commons. As such, it was readily agreed that the wider Conservative Party should be granted some input into the leadership election, although there was less agreement on what and how extensive this input should be. Among those favouring a minimalist role was St. John-Stevas, who believed that their role should indeed be a 'token' one, in order to ensure that Conservative MPs were the only electorate for the party's leader. Extending the role to party members beyond the House of Commons, he warned, 'would … raise grave constitutional difficulties' (St. John-Stevas, 1964).

Various options were mooted to address this conundrum, one of which was that the different sections of the Conservative Party would be allocated a weighted vote, either collectively or individually, but ensuring that the party's MPs were granted the largest weighting. Needless to say, various weightings were suggested, one of which was that Conservative MPs should hold 51 per cent, the party's peers 31 per cent, adopted candidates 13 per cent, and the National Union's Executive Committee the remaining 5 per cent. This would grant the party beyond the House of Commons a considerable input into choosing a leader, while ensuring that the largest role (just over half) remained with Conservative MPs. An alternative model suggested that Conservative MPs could be allocated three votes each, with Conservative peers each having

two votes, and the party's candidates and members of the National Union's Executive Committee casting one vote each.

At the time, the latter option would have granted Conservative MPs an overall majority of the total votes cast, but there was always a risk that if the party had fewer MPs elected in a subsequent general election, then the total votes cast by the other three groups might outweigh those of the party in the House of Commons. Furthermore, such outweighing was also possible if the votes of Conservative MPs were relatively evenly divided between two candidates, whereas the other sections of the party were strongly in favour of one of those candidates.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these variants of an electoral college were rejected, it being acknowledged that they risked rendering Conservative leadership elections too complex or convoluted (Douglas, 1963a). After all, so much of the intra-party discontent over Home's appointment derived from the lack of clarity and transparency surrounding the process from which he emerged as leader.

Electoral system

Once it had been decided that the formal vote should be confined to Conservative MPs only, with the extra-parliamentary permitted to express its views and preferences informally via local Conservative MPs or the National Executive of the National Union, the question remained of what precise method of election should be adopted. Initially, attention was focused on the Single Transferable Vote (STV), for this would both enable the party's MPs to be presented with a relatively wide choice of candidates, and ensure that the winning candidate had a clear majority as a consequence of the additional votes redistributed from the less popular candidates. A further advantage attributed to this method of election was that it would only require one ballot, as voters ranked their preferences at the same time, whereas other methods of election might require multiple ballots over several days until one of the candidates attained a majority or/and new candidates were permitted to enter the contest. This would be a particularly pertinent consideration when the Conservatives were in government and it was vital to expedite the election of a new leader (and prime minister).

However, after due deliberation, it was acknowledged that adopting the STV system for Conservative leadership contests would have three disadvantages. The first and simplest was that adopting a form of proportional representation (PR) for Conservative leadership contests might well lead to

demands for PR to be adopted for other types of elections, such as general elections. Given the Conservative Party's strong and consistent commitment to the simple plurality (first-past-the-post) electoral system for parliamentary elections, it would be incongruous to adopt a version of PR for electing its leaders.

The second objection to adopting STV was that, hypothetically at least, a candidate who failed to attract enough first-choice votes, and was thus eliminated, might still have been the preferred alternative of those voting for the two leading candidates. As Douglas (1965) explained, if three candidates were standing before 100 voters, with A receiving thirty-seven votes, B attracting thirty-three and C winning thirty, then C would be eliminated, and the second preference votes on their ballot paper distributed to A and B. However, if A and B were close rivals reflecting clear divisions in the party, then the supporters of A might prefer C to be leader rather than B, just as the supporters of B might also prefer C rather than A. In other words, C might have been the second-preference of the seventy voters who voted for A and B. This, of course, highlighted a constant dilemma of democracy, namely how to secure a balance between strength of support and breadth.

This led to the third objection to STV, namely that it militated against compromise or unity candidates. Of course, such candidates were perfectly free to stand at the outset, but in practice, such candidates are more likely to be identified if an initial vote has: a) failed to deliver a clear winner and b) support for the two leading candidates is relatively equal and strongly divided. As the above example illustrated, supporters of candidate A might also be bitterly opposed to B, and vice versa, such that whichever of them wins a leadership contest will lack the support of those MPs who supported the defeated candidate. This, of course, would make subsequent intra-party divisions more likely or more explicit, and thus pose serious problems for the new leader in terms of successful party management and statecraft.

It was therefore agreed that a much simpler option should be adopted, whereby each Conservative MP cast a vote, and if a candidate received a sufficient margin of victory, then s/he would be declared the duly elected Conservative leader. If the requisite margin of victory was not achieved, then subsequent ballots would be held, but the criteria for victory would vary in each case. Apart from its simplicity and transparency, one further advantage of this particular system was that if no candidate attained a sufficient majority in the first ballot, then other candidates could stand in the second ballot. This reflected recognition that the leading candidates in the first ballot were relatively evenly

matched in terms of support or/and were supported by distinct *blocs* within the party, which might reflect potential or actual divisions, such that if either contender narrowly won the second ballot, their victory might grievously weaken party unity. A second ballot would allow other candidates to step forward, one of whom might present themselves or be perceived as a compromise or unity candidate. Such a candidate would be much more likely to meet Stark's criterion of acceptability to the party's MPs, and thereby serve as a unifying factor, which, in turn would significantly enhance the second leadership criterion, namely electability.

Margin of victory

Having agreed that the electorate for future Conservative leadership contests should be the party's MPs only, it was then necessary to specify what would constitute a sufficient margin of victory. There was concern that, in a contest comprising just two candidates, a simple majority might enable one of those candidates to win by securing just one vote more, or perhaps, in percentage terms, 50.1 per cent of votes to 49.9 per cent. This, though, could prove damaging to unity and cohesion if the two candidates represented distinct *blocs* among the party's MPs, such that the victorious candidate was unacceptable to a large number of MPs, or what were termed 'pockets of radical opposition' among 'the remainder of the Party in the Commons (the fifty per cent minus who did not vote for the candidate)' (Douglas, 1963b).

Of course, it might be argued that the MPs who supported the defeated candidate should respect the majority verdict by rallying behind the winner, but this would, perhaps, be naive, particularly if the two candidates represented distinct ideological visions or markedly different stances on a major policy issue facing the party (and *inter alia* the nation). In such cases, the veracity of the winning candidate's mandate would almost certainly be subject to dispute, their political authority questioned and thus their ability to unite the party seriously weakened. After all, in 1963, the consultation process had revealed the extent to which the supporters of a particular candidate also expressed strong opposition to another, sometimes to the point of deeming them unacceptable. Indeed, this had been a major reason why Home emerged as the unity candidate, even though Macleod and Powell had refused to serve under Home back in 1963. Clearly, therefore, a margin of victory rather greater than 50 per cent plus one was needed to ensure that the elected leader had genuinely extensive and widespread support among Conservative MPs. Indeed, it was suggested that:

'Ideally, the chosen candidate should receive such overwhelming support as to preclude the emergence of factions of determined opposition to his [sic] leadership' (Douglas, 1963c).

The committee's recommendations

When the committee's report was published in February 1965, it decreed that subsequent Conservative leaders would be chosen according to the following rules and procedures (Conservative Central Office, 1965):

- Any Conservative MP wishing to put themselves forward as a candidate would need to be nominated by two of their parliamentary colleagues, although the names of the proposer and seconder would not be made public.
- The election would then be conducted via a secret ballot of Conservative MPs, each of whom would cast one vote. Members of the extra-parliamentary party would be allowed to express their views and preferences, but these would not be binding on MPs, who were, as Edmund Burke had insisted (in his 3 November 1774 speech to voters in Bristol), representatives, not delegates (cited in Bromwich, 2000: 55). However, the elected leader would still be subject to formal confirmation at a special meeting of the wider party.
- If a candidate won both an overall majority of votes cast and fifteen 15 per cent more than the second-placed candidate, they would be declared the winner and thus the new party leader, subject to formal confirmation by a special meeting of the wider Conservative Party.
- If none of the candidates met these two criteria, then a second ballot would be held within four working days. This time, new candidates could present themselves, if they too could secure a proposer and seconder. In a second ballot, an overall majority would be sufficient to secure election to the party leadership; the 15 per cent rule would not apply.
- If no candidate received an overall majority, then a third ballot would be held, comprising the three candidates who obtained the most votes in the second ballot. Each Conservative MP would then vote by ranking these candidates in order of preference. The candidate receiving the lowest number of first-preference votes would be eliminated, and the second-preference votes cast by their supporters would be allocated accordingly. This would ensure that one of the two remaining contenders received an overall majority and would duly become leader.

This method was deemed to be the simplest of the various options, certainly with regard to confining the vote to Conservative MPs. It reflected the concern raised in the committee's deliberations that if peers or/and party members were granted a significant vote, there was the risk that they might vote for a leader who was not supported by Conservative MPs, although the latter would then be obliged to work with such a leader on a daily basis (as many Labour MPs 'led' by Corbyn would doubtless attest). It was conceded, though, that the extra-parliamentary party should be able to convey its views either through local MPs or by communicating them directly to the chair of the National Union (Chelmer, 1965; du Cann 1965).

However, this rather assumed that Conservative MPs would take heed of the views and preferences of the grassroots membership when voting for a new leader, but as the party's parliamentarians saw themselves as representatives exercising their own judgement, not delegates mandated to vote in a particular way, the new system of leadership selection still left some extra-parliamentary members unhappy; particularly as they had no say whatsoever in the removal of an incumbent leader.

Conclusion

Until the 1960s, the selection of a new Conservative leader without the direct or active involvement of the party's MPs was not generally viewed as problematic. Vesting such an important decision in the hands of a small coterie of the party's most senior parliamentarians and elder statesmen reflected the Conservatives' philosophical veneration of authority, deference, hierarchy and wisdom acquired through age and experience. It was unashamedly elitist, but it had the advantage of minimising the damaging public divisions which were likely to manifest themselves if a more formal system of direct elections was adopted. Not only would the candidates and contenders almost certainly be (or at least feel) obliged to engage in campaigns to elicit support from their parliamentary colleagues, with all the public arguments and disagreements that this might reveal, the eventual result would also highlight the different levels of support enjoyed by each candidate.

This would not be too problematic if a candidate won by an emphatic margin, but if a leader was elected on the basis of a very narrow victory, then their legitimacy and political capital might well be weakened, because it would be clear just how many MPs did not vote for them in the leadership contest. There were only two ways of avoiding such a scenario. One was only to

announce whom the ultimate victor was in a party leadership election contest, rather than declaring the number of votes won by each candidate. However, this risked complaints about lack of transparency and suspicion about just how popular the new leader really was, especially if large numbers of prominent Conservative parliamentarians subsequently declared that they had not voted for the new leader. The other way of avoiding the divisions, suspicions and recriminations which were likely to arise from a formal intra-party leadership election was simply not to hold such contests in the first place, but instead to delegate the task of choosing a leader to the party's most senior and respected figures.

It was the latter approach that the Conservative Party adopted for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. That it worked well most of the time owed at least as much to serendipity as it did to the skills or wisdom of the magic circle, because on four occasions, there was a clearly acknowledged and acceptable heir apparent to the resigning leader: Balfour in 1902, Austen Chamberlain in 1921, Neville Chamberlain in 1937 and Eden in 1955. Meanwhile, in two other instances where there were two clear contenders, either they both graciously withdrew to allow a third unity candidate to be chosen or one of them declined to pursue their candidature, thus allowing the other contender to acquire the leadership without the need for a conscious and possibly contentious choice being made: Austen Chamberlain and Walter Long withdrew in 1911 to allow Bonar Law to become the unity candidate, while in 1940 Halifax was so reluctant to become Conservative leader and prime minister of the wartime Coalition (in spite of being widely viewed as the favourite) that Churchill was chosen, albeit with Neville Chamberlain remaining as Conservative leader for a few more months.

The other occasion where there were only two contenders was in 1957, when Butler and Macmillan were the two acknowledged rivals to succeed Eden. However, a potentially divisive contest was averted when it became evident that Macmillan enjoyed the overwhelming support of his cabinet colleagues and much of the parliamentary Conservative Party, too. Nonetheless, Macmillan's elevation to the leadership was not entirely without criticism over the manner of the consultative process, so when he himself was obliged to resign on health grounds in 1963, he resolved that his successor would be chosen on the basis of a wider and more systematic consultation among all levels of the Conservative Party.

However, far from eradicating criticism, the manner in which the consultation was conducted aroused considerable controversy and a strong suspicion

that it had been rigged to ensure that Home, a unity candidate favoured by Macmillan, actually won. Indeed, it transpired that MPs, peers and members of the extra-parliamentary party had not simply been asked who they thought should be the next Conservative leader, but how they ranked or rated the other candidates and who they thought would not be acceptable. It was also subsequently conceded that the views and preferences of some Conservative parliamentarians were ascribed greater weight than others. As a consequence, the magic circle was grievously discredited, and the Conservative Party was obliged to acknowledge that a new method of choosing its leaders was required, entailing some form of election. The day that Pretyman had hoped would never arrive was imminent.