

Mrs Thatcher cannot expect blind loyalty

The Labour Party has a constitution. The Social Democrats are searching for one. The Conservative Party, thank heavens, is much more sensible.

It has survived and mostly prospered without such flummery. It behaves more like a tribe than a democratic institution or an organized pressure group, responding to custom rather than rules, instinct rather than reason, and using its own liturgy and language for the conduct of its domestic affairs.

One of the things that binds the tribe together is loyalty, which has been both derided and envied as the party's secret weapon. Left and Right can get on well enough together most of the time, occasionally plunging

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the knife but more often burying the hatchet, because of a feeling of mutual need and common purpose. That is more practically valuable than deference and standing ovations.

Tory loyalty takes a number of forms. The party in the country transfers its complete trust from one leader to another at the drop of a ballot paper, something which should never be for-

gotten by those who have in the past been fortunate enough to benefit from it themselves. This is an admirable thing (from which most Conservative Members of Parliament get some personal benefit too); it ensures continuity and commitment.

However, no one can reasonably expect blind or unthinking loyalty. Some Conservatives give the impression that if the leadership announced that the moon was made of cheese they would be obliged themselves to concede at least the possible existence of planetary Cheddar.

The most vociferous proponents of the argument that the loyal should ask no questions are invariably those who have asked the most questions in the past. Yesterday's suburban guerrilla is today's secret policeman. Many of those who have been advanced in the party since 1975 have clearly owed much of their new status precisely to the fact that they were rebels under the *ancien régime*.

Indeed, one ministerial recruit to the Treasury team has done himself no harm by more recent rebellions under the present leadership, since these were launched from the Right and not from the Left. Very few of the leaders of the Conservative Party would have survived in its ranks, let alone got to the very top, if uncritical loyalty had been a binding obligation to membership.

Loyalty runs in both directions. We all reap as we sow. The party leader is more like the Archbishop of Canter-



by Chris Patten

bury, presiding over a broad church, than the high priest of a Southern Californian sect. Some measure of public and — one would hope — private respect for the breadth of opinion within the party is a useful quality in any leader.

These are the ground rules by which any sensible Tory moderate should have been prepared to play the game. Naturally, it is galling to have a whole political tradition (encompassing most of those who have led the Conservative Party successfully for a hundred years) written off as "wet".

And it is absurd that we have lived in a climate in which the mildest expression of anxiety about some of the consequences of present policies has led to the immediate charge or suspicion that one is hell-bent on joining the Social Democrats, as though a group of refugees from the Labour Party could

possibly be regarded as the modern custodians of two centuries of Tory history.

But despite these provocations most Tory moderates have been ready (as one should be) to give colleagues the benefit of the doubt. At most, we have—like Balfour—nailed our colours to the fence.

What has changed the ground rules? Two things, above all, I think. First, a growing alarm that the economic policies which the Government is pursuing are not going to work and must be changed. The new gods we have been required to worship have demanded heavy sacrifices, but they have not so far shown any sign of producing the harvest.

It is possible to criticize the imbalance in the policies of the last Conservative administration—the attempt to expand demand too rapidly and to police the inflationary consequences with a strict prices and incomes policy—without going to the opposite extreme. The truth, as is so often the case, lies somewhere in the middle.

No counter-inflation policy can work painlessly. No attempt to make British industry more competitive can be managed without some dislocation. But a sustained campaign against inflation should not involve the decimation of our industrial base.

The second reason for change is that the September reshuffle suggested—and was presumably meant to suggest—that there was going to be no shift in the Government's stance. Admittedly, there were some welcome features

of the reshuffle—the promotion of the ablest member of the "new intake"; the new team at the Department of Industry, the elevation of Lady Young.

But the message that we were meant to receive was clear. Milk and water must give way to fire and brimstone. The answer to our problems was not to learn from our mistakes and build—with some adjustments—on our successes.

No, the answer it appears is to drive on down the same

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road, even if it leads—and this is said as though heroism can justify courting disaster—to electoral defeat and obliteration. This really will not do.

So those of us who have nursed our doubts must state them more loudly and explicitly. Better to speak now than panic later. We must say precisely and unequivocally (as I tried to do in an article in these columns last June) what changes the Government should make.

In doing that, we must at all costs avoid—so far as the media will allow—the intrusion of personalities into what is a profoundly serious

political argument. Our objectives should be clear: to halt the runaway decline of the British economy; to make the reelection of Mrs Thatcher's Conservative Government more, not less, likely; and to rescue the moderate Tory cause from the broom cupboard to which it has been consigned.

Naturally, if no changes in policy are made but the strategy improbably works, we shall hardly have advanced what the headhunters would call our career prospects. That is a very small price to pay.

If changes on the other hand are made and the strategy then works, well and good. But if no changes are made and we go down to defeat, it will be little comfort to know that while the Conservative Party was slitting its own throat no-one could accuse us of trying to snatch away the razor.

Looking at the state of the Labour Party today, it is perfectly clear that the perversion of its principles and beliefs has been caused by countless small acts, private and public, of political cowardice. The Tory tradition, stretching back into the mists of our tribal history, should not be allowed to perish for the same reasons. That would be the greatest disloyalty of all.

The author is Conservative MP for Bath and one of the contributors to Changing Gear, the controversial critique of Government economic policy published this week.