

WEEK IN FOCUS: THE PARKINSON AFFAIR

Sally Scaimes



The leader, Mrs Thatcher; the lover, Sara Keays; and (right) the wife, Ann Parkinson

PARKINSON

A TALE OF THREE WOMEN

S. 1ms 16 Oct 1993

LAST THURSDAY night, the three women who dominate Cecil Parkinson's life were each — in their own way — marking the end of the affair.

In Blackpool's Winter Gardens, his leader — to whom he owed a political rise so spectacular that he saw himself, quite seriously, as a future prime minister — was celebrating at the Centenary Conference Ball. After Parkinson's satisfactory, if not ecstatic, reception at conference that afternoon, she was in buoyant mood. She enjoyed a particularly spirited rendering of Happy Birthday, her 58th, and then declared, with all her usual confidence: "I know where we're going."

Some five miles away at Skipwood Creek, in the pretentious surroundings of the River House restaurant, his wife — to whom he owed the chance that made him wealthy — was celebrating too. Dining with Parkinson and Sir Larry Lamb, editor of the Daily Express, she was clearly relieved that the conference ordeal was over — and relaxed enough, according to an eavesdropper, to be moderately rude about "that woman".

But in the Old Rectory at Marksbury, near Bath, "that woman", his former secretary and jilted mistress, was putting the finishing touches to a well-typed statement to which he now owes his political ruin. While the men from The Times — deputy executive editor, home news editor and a reporter, Richard Dowling — fretted about their final deadline, she insisted on three

conditions: the statement should run verbatim; it should be run "without frills"; and, before publication, two copies of it should be given to 10 Downing Street — one for the prime minister, and one for Parkinson.

The fact that Sara Keays had decided to break her silence — a silence Parkinson had been banking on — had been known to the Tory whips since about 8 pm. Charles Douglas Home, the editor of The Times, was in Blackpool and he had alerted the chief whips John Wakeham, the moment his men set off for Bath.

But it was impossible for anyone to guess how damaging the statement might be until they knew precisely what Keays had typed down.

So, unaware that the fuse was burning, the Parkinsons rounded off their evening with drinks at the Imperial Hotel, in the suite of Alistair McAlpine, the honorary Tory treasurer. Meanwhile, the prime minister was in her suite, working into the night, polishing up the speech she was to deliver on Friday.

It was just after midnight when Keays's statement was telephoned from Bath to The Times, where they held the presses for 35 minutes to change the front page. At the same time, the statement was quickly read over to the duty officer at No. 10, who asked for a pause — to allow him to make notes — only when there were references to the prime minister. A copy of the full text was to be sent round by

● The thin blue line held almost to the end. All week the highly-disciplined Tory party machine had kept the Parkinson affair at bay. But on the last day of the conference at Blackpool the revelations of one woman brought the defences crashing down. Insight chronicles the affair that ruined a glittering career and knocked a government sideways

INSIGHT

messenger. It arrived some time after 11 pm.

From that moment, Parkinson's resignation has inevitable. For Keays revealed three facts which Parkinson's own supposedly candid statement of 11 days ago had omitted.

● That, at least by her account, Parkinson had twice proposed marriage and then changed his mind.

● That she had "blameless" him to tell the prime minister about their affair, but he had refused.

● That he had agreed publicly to admit he was the father of her unborn child only after she had threatened to reveal the truth, "to defend herself".

Parkinson she thought she might be pregnant, but it was not until June 9 — polling day — that Keays confirmed she was having a baby. Later that day Parkinson told the prime minister: "I think I'll have to marry her."

But Parkinson knew — and knows — that the last thing he could afford to do was to get into a public debate with Keays over the nitty-gritty details of their affair. ("Sara's Story" would be a very saleable commodity in Fleet Street and, although she has turned down several lucrative offers from newspapers, she has made it clear that she will tell more — to The Times — if Parkinson challenges her version.)

When a very shaken Parkinson went to see Mrs Thatcher in her suite at 2.15 on Friday morning they agreed to "sleep on it" — perhaps in the forlorn hope that Keays's statement would not make too much impact.

But any such illusion was shattered at 6.10 when John Cole, the BBC's political editor, became the first of many to ring the Parkinsons'

room at the Imperial to ask for his comments.

Parkinson's second meeting with his leader, at about 8 am, was short and emotional. Mrs Thatcher agreed with him that there was now no possible option but for him to leave what insiders call "the court". The only advice she could give him was to take his wife home as soon as possible.

Meanwhile a Tory party secretary was walking past the Parkinsons' open bedroom door. She says that all she heard was the sound of Ann Parkinson sobbing.

IN BOTH his business and political careers, Cecil Parkinson owes an enormous debt to his wife.

Parkinson's father was a railwayman in the Lancashire town of Carnforth. A Labour politician would not be slow to parade such a provenance, to Parkinson it has seemed almost an embarrassment, for he has told interviewers he is not even sure what job his father did. There are other embarrassments too: while at the Royal Lancaster Grammar School he joined the Labour party and refused to enlist in the school corps. "I was very idealistic," he has said — making clear the pejorative connotations of the term.

At Cambridge, where he read English, his style gradually changed. He took little interest in politics, joined a dining club, and won a half-blue for athletics. By the time he joined a management trainee course with the Metal Box company, in 1956, his Lancashire accent had disappeared. And when he met the

daughter of a building contractor on the same management course, it seemed a perfect match.

Ann Jarvis, four years younger than Parkinson, came from Hertfordshire. She had a comfortable rather than privileged background: "Suburban rather than county," says a former neighbour and lifelong friend, "tennis-rackets rather than horses." Her father, a self-made man, was determined to do his best by her, sending her to the Abbey School in Malpas to receive a private education. It was not wasted on her: she was very bright, and socially successful, the friend says.

So when the vacuous, sporty home-county girl met the ambitious, sure Cambridge graduate, the attraction was almost instantaneous. They were married the following year.

It was natural for Frank Jarvis to continue to think of his daughter's aptness. He introduced his in-law to Parkinson and Parkinson joined to become a clerical clerk, becoming a partner in 1960. While there, he developed keen financial acumen, and was ideally placed to take advantage of the main business chance when it was one of his eight years later. The l00, emanated from Amalgamated Jarvis was playing golf when he learned of a Stockport building company that was strapped for cash and looking for a buyer. He passed on the tip to Parkinson, who



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THE PARKINSON AFFAIR

Sex please, we're British

A MESSY end to the Parkinson affair was on the cards from the start. Tory conference stage-managers used their Old Vic skills to orchestrate a display of public support from the faithful in Blackpool. But backstage the private misgivings of many senior Tories, which we reported last week, were still being voiced. The Tory tabloids were anxious to help, especially since Mrs Thatcher had gone out on a limb for her industry secretary. But they also had a natural journalist's desire to cover every twist and turn of a story they readers were devouring, thereby keeping the scandal alive and making Mr Parkinson's position increasingly untenable.

Moreover, as we argued last Sunday, his decision to brazen it out was not the wisest course. A promising political future would not be lying in the rubble this weekend if he had gone for divorce and kept his promise to marry his pregnant mistress, or if he had resigned from cabinet until the affair had cooled down — or done both.

Instead, he chose a high-risk course which was vulnerable to the latest development, and the unexpected.

That came late on Thursday night. Sara Keays launched her Exocet in The Times and blew Mr Parkinson, the Tory conference and even Mrs Thatcher's victory speech out of the water. It would be comforting to think that his resignation was not the end of the matter, but spectacular finale to bringing down the curtain on a political silly season which has run all the

way from election day on June 9 to the reopening of Parliament next week. But the British have an insatiable thirst for sex-and-politics cocktails, and a few days ahead could see several more lined up at the bar.

First, because Mr Parkinson has come to a messy end, the scandal is likely to drag on for some time yet, especially since lover and mistress are now at daggers drawn. More ominously, political London is now awash with stories and rumors about the sexual indiscretions (even perversions) of a host of other leading politicians.

Much of Fleet Street is currently checking them out. There could be some, in the cabinet and shadow cabinet, sleeping less than soundly these nights. The country could be in for some seedy diversions.

Meanwhile, there is the rather more significant matter of whether or not the Thatcher government can recover from the events of the past 10 days. Too much can be made of the political fall-out. The sophisticated say that Mrs Thatcher's judgement was flawed, and that the Parkinson affair has harmed her own standing.

Ordinary people, however, are more likely to admire her for showing loyalty to a friend

THE SUNDAY TIMES

and colleague. The prime minister delivered a lacklustre speech at Blackpool on Friday, but, in the circumstances, that was only to be expected. She must have realised that nobody was too interested in what she had to say. There is no reason to believe she has lost the capacity to lead.

Moreover, once the new political season gathers pace, the government could easily find a second wind. Neil Kinnock will be a fresh, formidable face, but he carries an albatross of his own in the shape of the Labour party, whose true believers remain ever-vigilant to block any effort to give Labour the image or policies which might actually win elections. David Owen could turn out to be a more formidable opponent than Mr Kinnock, but he is a general without an army and that undermines even the most effective parliamentary performances. David Steel is the third Young Turk to be ranged against Mrs Thatcher this winter, but he has yet to recover from his summer doldrums.

analysis of public spending on page 62 shows, there is precious little evidence to support Mr Lawson's contention that current levels of public spending are a hindrance to economic recovery. Indeed, it is more likely, at this particular stage, that the public spending axe would cut the guts out of what economic growth there is.

The signal achievement of the Thatcher years has been the way the prime minister has moved the political battle on to her terrain. David Owen has discovered the radical potential of market economics and Neil Kinnock sounds more and more like a social democrat. Only the Labour party conference takes socialism seriously these days. For everybody else, the debate is now about how best to run a market economy. That can only be good for the future health of this country.

A mistake in economic policy at this crucial juncture, however, would thwart the Thatcher revolution. The rigours of the past four years will have been worthwhile if they lead to the re-invigoration of the economy on a broad front. The government's priority must be to come up with the right mix of policies — including a firm commitment to competition in industry and the judicious use of some modest public investment — to guarantee growth. At present economic policy, like the economy, is stuck in a rut. Mrs Thatcher should beware of chancellors who preach the old-time religion just to please the congregation.

AMMOS

IN BLACKPOOL

Revelations of an affair by the sea

● **MONDAY.** I arrive at my first Tory party conference. A lavish buffet supper is laid in the Imperial Hotel's Royal Suite, where the party treasurer, the Honourable Alistair McAlpine, son of the builder, is in temporary residence. Everyone falls silent, eyes fixed on the outside television screen. Cecil Parkinson begins his Panoramadeal. The set's volume level is ordinal. Sir Robin Day throws himself full length in front of the box to battle with modern technology. Success. It looks as if the penitent will be forgiven this week.

● **TUESDAY.** Conference hall exceeds anything I ever heard about these gatherings — an incredibly orderly affair. One delegate attempts a joke about Westminster politicians. He is met with stony silence. Chairman Gummer's pep talk about his predecessor's heroism

to me: "My wife says I ought to read your book about Tony. She's brought it here with her. She'll want to meet you."

● **WEDNESDAY.** How do Tory wives meet their husbands? Thatcher government researcher in the House of Commons library, Fiona Fowler ditto, Sarah Biffen was John Biffen's Commons secretary. Judy Hurd was Douglas Hurd's constituency secretary. Penny Gummer was secretary to Ted Heath.

Mrs Lawson is a second wife and at 36 finds herself childless of No 11, Downing Street. Her feelings are ambivalent. The "business and vines" of No. 11, along with two small Lawson children, make it impractical to pursue her own work. "Without my career, my sense of identity is diminished."

"On the other hand, one is only human. It is difficult to disown the 'status' that people give you because of your husband's job — particularly those people who might not have done before. The answer for a lot of Tory wives is to make a career out of being a political wife. I'm considering that now."

The conference audience give Mr Heseltine a standing ovation even before he delivers his forceful, highly skilled speech. Immediately afterwards he addresses a Tory Reform Group fringe meeting where he stands behind a table — erect cartilage, navy suit with broad sharp shoulders, right hand in a bellicose fist, left hand open in eloquence. One then notices below the table that the speaker is wearing a pair of black shoes on the outside of his black shoes, resting his ankles. Rather endearing.

● **THURSDAY.** The audience assemble early to make sure of



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quickly realised what a plum had fallen to his lot: "They were mad to send me, he once said."

He formed a partnership with a local businessman, and scraped together the asking price, and was not looked back since. That purchase, together with a specialised piping company in Kent, and shares in the factory building firm, formed the basis of Parkinson's wealth, which today stands at the short of £1

Whereas Parkinson had almost no interest in politics when they met, Ann was a fervent Tory, immersed in the life of a local constituency association, from bazaars and coffee-mornings to meetings to work at elections. She promptly canvassed Parkinson too — and he joined the party in the same year as they were married.

Parkinson moved assuredly into political life. He became treasurer of the local branch of the party, Flamstead village, where they lived; Ann was delighted with her contribution. Parkinson soon also formed an alliance with another ambitious meritocrat — Norman Tebbit. They climbed the rungs of the Hemel Hempstead constitu-

taking a five-year part-time degree in sociology at Hatfield Polytechnic. She graduated with an upper second, and one of her tutors found her "a very conscientious student, hard-working, and stimulating to

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machines, introducing computers, and streamlined public relations, and direct-mail marketing, handled by a man Parkinson recruited from the Mars corporation.

The Falklands war brought Parkinson's apotheosis. Thatcher promoted him once again, to the war cabinet handling the nation's destiny. He was there to feed in party sentiment, but also to help balance the deliberations. Whitelaw and Pym, both veterans of the Second World War, had a temperamental preference for compromise; Parkinson and Nott would stiffen Thatcher's resolve to retrieve the national honour. In the event, he proved more constant even than the erratic

SARA KEAYS'S version of what also happened on the day of electoral triumph is extraordinary. She claims that Parkinson found time to seek "a reconciliation, and asked me to marry him. I gladly accepted." She also claims he said he was about to see the prime minister to inform her of their relationship, and to tell her that he was going to get a divorce. "That evening he told me he had so informed her," she says.

The version of the Parkinson camp is somewhat different. They say that he saw Keays on June 8, not June 9, and not to seek a reconciliation, but to learn that the pregnancy she had first suspected in May had now been confirmed. When she told him

Thatcher after the polls closed the next evening. The same day, in the same vein, he supposedly telephoned Colonel Keays, Sara's father, to say he would "stand by her."

In other words, while the picture she presents is one of the marriage proposal growing out of a "loving relationship", the picture presented by the Parkinson camp is of a man trapped by an unwanted pregnancy, deciding to do the decent thing: a course of action the prime minister evidently advised him strongly against. Equally difficult to square are the very different pictures of Sara Keays, the woman, that are emerging from the two sides. To the Parkinson camp she is a not very

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Parkinson moved assuredly into political life. He became treasurer of the local branch of the party, Flamstead village, where they lived; Ann was secretary. Parkinson soon also formed an alliance with another ambitious meritocrat: Norman Tebbit. They climbed the rungs of the Hemel Hempstead constituency association together, equipping themselves with a mobile speaking platform and sometimes asking supporters to heckle them to enliven dull meetings.

In 1970, Parkinson was nominated for the Northampton seat, and narrowly lost. That November he inherited Iain Macleod's old seat, Enfield West, at a by-election and won (he later moved to the home territory, Hertfordshire South - now Hertsmeres). Ted Heath gave him his first tastes of office as a PPS in the Department of Trade and Industry, then as a whip. Thatcher promoted him in 1979, making him a minister of state at the Department of Trade under John Nott, where he spent two hard-working, if unspectacular, years.

Parkinson's great leap forward came in 1981. As party chairman, Lord Thorneycroft had made some injudiciously "wet" remarks about the economy. At Trade, Parkinson had proved his ideological soundness, and Thatcher gave him Thorneycroft's job. With it went the undemanding posts of paymaster general and chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster - and a seat in the cabinet. As he drove away from Chequer after accepting the offer, Parkinson told his wife it had changed their lives.

The Parkinsons have three daughters; Mary, Emma, and Joanna, born within four years of each other in the first years of the marriage. As the girls grew up, Ann had diversified her interests by

taking a five-year part-time degree in sociology at Hatfield Polytechnic. She graduated with an upper second, and one of her tutors found her "a very conscientious student, hard-working, and stimulating to teach".

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Tebbit: early ally

strains beneath the surface of their marriage, she displayed a picture of contentment and unity. She would talk of "our fight" in the election, and told an interviewer: "I believe it's an us situation. It has always been Ann and Cecil."

Until his appointment as party chairman, Parkinson had been considering only a limited career in politics: one decent cabinet job, perhaps, before returning to business. But now, encouraged by Thatcher's patronage, his horizons broadened. He had considerable power as boss of the party machine, without - to the resentment of some colleagues - being bogged down with ministerial tasks.

He had quickly shown that he understood the importance of the right kind of publicity to further his own career. When he arrived at Tory headquarters to take over as chairman, with cameramen duly assembled, Thorneycroft failed to recognise him. Parkinson drove round the block to ensure that the encounter was suitably captured.

He also proved his loyalty, and worth, to Thatcher by modernising the Party

machine, introducing computers, and streamlined public relations, and direct-mail marketing, handled by a man Parkinson recruited from the Mars corporation.

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Parkinson's role raised him even more in Thatcher's esteem. He was crucial in steering her towards a June election: he devised the strategy of blaming both the unions and the rest of the world in general for unemployment, and directly oversaw Labour's humiliation at the polls. His ambitions grew further. He believed he had the credentials to take over the Foreign Office, and would hint that David Owen had broken the taboo against younger men taking over such a major post.

Even that, it seemed, was not the limit. When it became clear during the election campaign that they would be in power for at least five more years, Conservative politicians began to speculate about successors to Thatcher herself. The obvious front-runners were Tebbit and Heseltine; but neither was as valued by Thatcher as Parkinson - as Parkinson himself knew. And if Tebbit and Heseltine, both abrasive characters with substantial bodies of enemies, should falter, who better to move through the middle than Cecil Parkinson?

When the landslide victory of June 9 became clear, it was Parkinson who shared the moment of triumph with Thatcher as she acknowledged supporters' cheers from an upstairs window at Tory Central Office.

SARA KEAYS'S version of what else happened on the day of electoral triumph is extraordinary. She claims that Parkinson found time to seek "a reconciliation, and asked me to marry him. I gladly accepted." She also claims he prime minister to inform her of their relationship, and to tell her that he was going to get a divorce. "That evening he told me he had so informed her," she says.

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- That she had "implored" him to tell the prime minister about their affair, but he had refused;
- That he had agreed publicly to admit he was the father of her unborn child only after she had threatened to reveal the truth, "to defend herself".

Parkinson's supporters say that he hotly disputes some of her version of events; in particular, her implication that he knew about the pregnancy in May, when he first said he was not going to marry her. They claim the sequence was this: on May 9 - when Mrs Thatcher announced there would be a June election - Keays told

Keays over the nitty-gritty details of their affair. ("Sara's Story" would be a very saleable commodity in Fleet Street and, although she has turned down several lucrative offers from newspapers, she has made it clear that she will tell more to The Times - if Parkinson challenges her version.)

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year. It was natural for Mrs Jarvis to continue to think of his daughter's happiness. He introduced his son-in-law to his accountants, and Parkinson joined the firm as a chartered clerk, becoming a partner in 1961. While there he developed a keen financial acumen, and was ideally placed to take advantage of the main business chance when it was came his eight years later. That, too, emanated from Ann's father.

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IT WAS the worst Conservative conference for 20 years, and not just because it will always be remembered as Parkinson's Waterloo. It was bad because it so rarely told the truth. Although I have been to a lot of Tory conferences, and will uncomplainingly concede that truth-telling has rarely been high on their agenda, the deception and concealments this time were never so blatant, never so unnecessary - and never so damaging.

The Parkinson affair, of course, was a mighty blot. It would hardly be possible to invent a more corrosive distraction, a more humiliating political mess. The damage it has done to the prime minister may not look all that deep, as time passes. But some of it will be ineradicable. It removes a large limb of her political argument, the claim to Conservatism's moral superiority. It also shows that her political judgment is fallible. She simply did not foresee what was likely to happen if her most famous protégé was continued in office.

But this was not the worst of it. Mr Parkinson, now a pitiable figure, will recede. A new man will succeed him at Trade and Industry. It is not, in any case, a very important job. What will not recede is memories of the dozy arrogance of the upper ranks at the Winter Gardens. They mostly studied effortless complacency. It was best exemplified by the fact that, with

trifling exceptions, not a single minister said a single thing which the vast majority of the people present did not want to hear.

NOW THIS, it may be said, is common enough. Are not most Tory party conferences essentially celebrations of the leadership? Do they not convene with the primary object of telling the world about unity and success?

Maybe. But this year's met in rather special circumstances. According to the government's own analysis, the country is in terrible trouble. It faces a crisis of economic management unprecedented in scale and complexity. Committed to cutting taxes, the government must, it says, cut public spending. But it doesn't know how to. An enormous clash is impending between irresistible force and immovable object, if the commitment is to be made good.

This picture is coloured over by another, which shows an economy about to start booming. There is also a school of thought which says that the collision between tax cuts and spending need not occur; Gilmourities, Priorities and the rest dispute the need for cuts of either kind. All the same, the official line is defiant: major public-spending cuts there must be.

This explosive necessity was in fact discussed in

Blackpool. But the venue, like that of other key encounters, was an upstairs room at the Imperial Hotel, where the prime minister met her ministers in mini-cabinet meetings. The conference would have been more worthwhile if even a trace of these discussions had found its way into the Winter Gardens. Instead, the audience was treated to the flutulent clichés of Mr Nigel Lawson. The conference was about the future, he intoned. There was a new mood. The election proved that Tory policies were understood and popular. We must cut tax. We must also cut spending.

The inconvenient parts of the argument were simply not confronted: at a minor level, the strange absence of popular demand for tax cuts - but at a major level, the grey opaqueness about what exactly should be cut. We heard a certain amount about hard choices, but no invitation to participate in what those choices should be.

Here were the Tory clans

Can Tories take the truth?

Inside Politics

by HUGO YOUNG
Political Editor



gathered in conclave. Here were the ministers who sit on a parliamentary majority of 140 and four years of unchallengeable power. Yet what they mostly offered was the patronising reassurance of their good intentions, and generalities behind which it would be impertinent to inquire.

Mr Lawson was not the only culprit. There was also Mr Michael Heseltine, transposing his grating triumphalism from one department to another with clockwork ease: last year inner cities, this year the Soviet menace - it will all do nicely for the pre-lunch ovation.

Or consider Mr Patrick Jenkin, newly in charge of the destruction of local government. Many Tories present were councillors. The abolition of the metropolitan counties may not bother them much, but the grip of central control over local spending does. Mr Jenkin made little attempt to explain this crucial deviation from Toryism

old and new, his speech degenerating into an attack on "Marxism".

And finally, there is Mr Leon Brittan. Unlike Mr Lawson, he cannot be accused of failing to come clean. He told the conference exactly how much heavier sentencing was going to be for serious crime. On the other hand, this was scarcely courageous. It gave conference no discomfort, and saved Mr Brittan from any smell of it.

It also had the quality these men share. It told a great deal less than the truth. The minister was not saying by any means all he knew. But, like Mr Lawson, he prefers not to confront this captive audience with realities, tossing them soothing fantasies instead.

AND THE conference accepts them. In public it is almost always obedient, prepared to put up with the unconfiding platitudes of these grand ministers with remarkable lack of complaint. It is just as good in a crisis. It did exactly what was wanted for Cecil.

But the public air is deceptive. The conference could cheer Cecil in public, while speaking with bitterness and derision in private. The same thing goes for the policies. People may sit there while Mr Lawson struts the stage, but they leave without a credible sense of direction.

All the radical choices

which, on the Thatcher-Lawson prospectus, have to be made postulate shifts in public expectations. If the welfare state is to be cut down massive public education is necessary. If the British Arm of the Rhine is to be cut back the armchair generals must begin to contemplate it. If measures of such size which ministers imply, we must prepare for if taxes are to be cut. Yet they always avoid the language of concrete cases.

Of course, there is another possibility. This is that the prospectus itself has been abandoned. Perhaps the secret agenda is even now being jettisoned. Faced by fact Thatcherism has already seen a good few treasured pledges along the way; a rare moment of truth-telling last week was provided by Sir Keith Joseph blankly saying that the plan for education vouchers was impractical and had been dropped. There are those who sense that the Great Public Spending Crisis, so keenly advertised and fiercely promised, will turn out to be sham, as new growth forecasts miraculously make it unnecessary this year.

If this happens, it will be the grossest dishonesty of all. For those who came to Blackpool it will also be somewhat bewildering. Do we have a party which knows its way but is not prepared to discuss it? Or a party which does not know where it is going? Either answer is bad news. And next year the troops may not be so docile - or so very luridly distracted.



Parkinson plods through his conference speech with the Prime Minister, Gummer, Denis Thatcher and Ann Parkinson in supportive roles

S. Tms 16 OCT 1983

'I'm glad it's ended' - and I'm glad it's ended like this'

INSIGHT

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competent, but fiercely ambitious and calculating secretary to whom, in the end, he was only casually attracted, and who is now motivated by vindictiveness.

To her friends, she is a bright, loyal, and absolutely straightforward woman, with an acute political brain. The relationship with Parkinson was always based on "mutual interests and admiration".

And her only concern now is for the welfare of their child.

What is certain is that she is strong-willed and self-sufficient - qualities which her friends believe she gained from being raised in an extremely close-knit family. She is one of five children.

Her father, Hastings Keays was a career soldier who was promoted to lieutenant-colonel in the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers shortly after she was born in 1942.

Now a landowner, he is, according to family friends, "nice, rather traditional". Her mother - who recently died of cancer - was an artist, "intellectual and, rather like Sara herself, straight-talking and quite dominant".

Sara, and her identical twin Elizabeth, went to Clifton girls' school in Bristol, where they had to be separated so that the teachers could tell them apart. Sara later felt that she drew the short straw, and got the more difficult subjects as a result, her sister won a place at university, but she did not.

Instead she moved to London, where she worked as a secretary in the city. Then, at the age of 23, she got a job in the House of Commons with the newly-elected MP for Enfield West, Parkinson.



Parkinson: like a boxer in the ring

Their affair apparently started three years later, but from the start they appeared very close. "One always thought of them as a pair, as political colleagues," said one of their friends. "She was a political sounding-board to him - more like a PA than secretary - and she worked 12 to 14 hours a day."

Until 1979 - when Parkinson's meteoric rise began - they were extremely discreet, and few people knew that their relationship was not platonic.

But then, as Parkinson was elevated to trade minister he became much more "visible", and the gossip started. In that year, he made his first proposal of marriage. But quite soon he had second thoughts, and withdrew it on the grounds that one of his daughters was going through the trauma of withdrawal from heroin addiction.

Within months the relationship had begun to cool, and Keays decided to go and work in Brussels, as a secretary to Roy Jenkins; Parkinson helped her get the job.

But when she returned to London, and to the job in Westminster, in early 1981 they were, she says, still planning to get married; indeed, according to Colonel Keays, Parkinson told him that the target date for their wedding was June 1983.

Once again, however, the version from the Parkinson camp is different. They say that Keays's move to Brussels marked a complete break in the relationship, and that it started again only this year. Even then, they say, the couple slept together just two or three times.

But there is no dispute that he made her pregnant, and that, having told her in May he did not want to marry her, he told her in June that he would.

There is also no dispute that on August 5 Parkinson went on holiday to the Bahamas with his wife and family. Until then, he had not told them what he had confessed to Mrs Thatcher. Ten days into the vacation, under pressure from his wife who disclosed her awareness of the gossip beginning to circulate in political London, he admitted everything.

Finally, there is a dispute that on September 1 when in London, he arranged a secret meeting with Keays and, in the words of her segment, "He informed me that he had decided whilst abroad that he was not going to marry me after all."

his life - Ann Parkinson - had reassessed herself.

This appears to have surprised Parkinson. When he had told both Keays and the prime minister that he would get a divorce, he assumed that Ann would not want him back. Instead, she and his three daughters took the opposite line.

So he now resolved to make the decisive break. He knew the time-bomb was ticking away and there would be a scandal. He hoped he could contain it.

Keays was determined there should be a public statement. Parkinson had to agree but tried to ensure that it appeared as far ahead of the Blackpool conference as possible, and that it should put him in the best possible light.

These two objectives soon proved contradictory. The two sets of solicitors - Farrer and Co for Parkinson, Geoffrey Wilks for Keays - argued for more than four weeks about the precise wording of the statement. The dispute boiled down to different versions of a single sentence - but one which conveyed crucially different nuances about the true state of the relationship.

It concerned the promise of marriage, the point which was later picked on by many Tories as Parkinson's most damning mistake.

The Parkinson camp wanted: "On discovering that she was pregnant, I decided to marry her." Cecil, in other words, would be seen to be doing the decent thing though acting under duress.

The Keays faction wanted words which reflected a "long-standing, loving relationship", which still existed. Their favoured phrase was, therefore: "During our relationship, I told Miss Keays of my wish to marry her."

The two sides had reached an impasse. Blackpool loomed ever closer, and Parkinson was ready enough to agree to a generous financial settlement - £100,000 was the figure being touted in ministerial circles - last week, with a separate settlement for the child when it was born. But he refused to accept the words, with all their overtones, which Keays was demanding.

The stalemate was broken, in the end, by an event outside his control - although one he must always have feared. It occurred on October 4, the moment copies of Private Eye went on sale. Not for the first time, a wise of gossip in the notorious satirical fortnightly was about to change the course of history. And not for the first time, the story, as it appeared, was obscure to the point of near-incomprehensibility.

It said that one Sara Keays, described as Cecil Parkinson's fun-loving secretary, was pregnant. But it implied that another MP, whom it named, was responsible.

Two items seem to have arrived in the Eye office simultaneously. First it was said that the Parkinson marriage was on the rocks. It then received an anonymous note, saying that Parkinson and telling at least part of the story which later emerged about the minister's change of mind.

The Eye, however, was cautious. Although it makes a specialty of publishing unverified dirt about the private lives of public people - it more senior politicians in a different scandal, in its next issue - it is running out of money to pay libel damages.

Eye editor Richard Ingrams told his staff to try and confirm the story. They couldn't. When they resorted to a typical diversionary tactic - "We thought a libel suit would probably have come from

announced after the statement was published.

As they prepared to go to Blackpool, many Tories did not believe this. Sooner or later he would have to go, they thought. The government was adamant, but backbenchers were feeble. A broad sample of Tory MPs interviewed by The Sunday Times on Saturday produced an almost unanimous view that the prime minister should have accepted Parkinson's resignation.

Additionally, there was Sara Keays. The deal appeared to be breaking down. Last Saturday selected newspapers and television programmes - ITN but not the BBC - were contacted by her solicitor and told she was returning to London. Photographs were invited, and duly appeared on the front pages of the conspicuously pregnant rebuke to Victorian values.

Parkinson survived his first ordeal, an interview on Monday's Panorama, answering Fred Emery with dignity and refusing to go beyond the statement. He thought was meant to settle the matter once and for all. He scored points for courage.

On Tuesday in the conference hall, the new young party chairman, John Gummer, further defused trouble in his opening speech, by praising Parkinson and arousing 30 seconds' worth of applause.

By Wednesday, they thought they were in the clear. When Parkinson arrived to make his own speech, on Thursday morning, he was nervous but determined. His progress from the entrance to the platform at the Winter Gardens, through the densest through any conference has seen, brilliantly spotlighted by television lights, resembled, appropriately, that of a boxer making his way to the ring.

After the speech, the conference behaved as to the manner drilled, supplying a decent but not excessive ovation.

No one in that hall, however, was quite so attentive as members of the Keays family, watching on television in Bath. Within an hour of Parkinson's ovation, the telephone rang on the desk of Times reporter Richard Dowden. It was a member of the Keays family, prompted by Sara, suggesting that there was "a great deal more to be said", if The Times would care to listen.

What exactly provoked Sara Keays into breaking silence is not known. Clearly it had something to do with her rage at Parkinson's version of events, supplemented by her misreading of a Daily Telegraph leader which she thought was castigating her,

on behalf of the Tory party, for not having had an abortion.

Some say she was furious at the Panorama interview, in which Parkinson delicately but demeaningly referred to her as "the other person". Again, his conference speech, with its grateful reference to Ann Parkinson and its manifest importance to the party's herculean efforts to see Parkinson emerge unscathed, may have tipped the balance.

Either way, the deed was quickly done. The Times journalists were soon speeding along the M4 to Bath. It was already 8 pm.

But not for nothing had Keays watched and assisted politicians over a decade. When The Times men arrived, the statement, which she composed herself, was typed and ready, as were her conditions: that it should be published in full, that it should remain unvarnished - and that its contents should be conveyed with all deliberate speed via Downing Street to Blackpool.

The great Conservative machine was thus broken by a single thrust. But in the end there was a sense of relief. "I'm glad it's ended", the conference chairman, Peter Lane, was heard to say as he left the Imperial Hotel. "And I'm glad it's ended like this."

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