

The Boris and Dave show

Under pressure from London's mayor, the prime minister has raised his game

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A BLOND beast stalked David Cameron at the Conservatives' party conference in Birmingham. Boris Johnson, the attention-loving London mayor, charmed and titillated the party faithful. Fringe event organisers reported that his appearance, entitled "Re-elected and Olympastic" (Mr Johnson helped oversee the games in London and has beaten Labour twice to run the capital) drew more attendees than the Friends of Russia vodka party and the perennially attractive "how to exit the EU" bash.

Free from the responsibilities and compromises of national coalition government, the mayor offered intoxicating, if improbable, hints of bringing back selective schools and slashing income taxes. Johnsonism is an own-brand product, only loosely affiliated with the Conservative Party. After he had delivered his umpteenth comment at odds with party policy, one senior cabinet minister coldly described the habit as "the Boris blurt".

But the real problem posed by the mayor's giddy appeal to conservatives is the sharp contrast with Mr Cameron's flagging popularity and the woeful lack of grip in his Downing Street operation. Mr Johnson, though outwardly loyal to the prime minister, somehow managed to emphasise this by saying he was sure that the electorate would embrace Mr Cameron in 2015 "when the economy has been turned around and people are benefiting in jobs and growth". What would happen to the present incumbent were this happy scenario not to materialise was left unsaid. Few believe Mr Johnson would have difficulty securing a quick passage back into Parliament if Mr Cameron weakens before 2015—a natural springboard for a leadership bid.

The current occupant of 10 Downing Street hardly needs reminding of the need to focus on growth and employment. After a period defined by inelegant U-turns over the budget, lack of economic progress, squabbles over Lords reform and mishaps including the expensive mishandling of a rail franchise, even loyal MPs are concerned about the lack of a broad,

convincing vision. In the absence of one, differences over Europe and other flashpoints are more likely to turn nasty. Mr Cameron also needed to reply to a perky speech by Ed Miliband, the Labour leader, last week and persuade his own side that he has a fighting chance of winning the next election in 2015 outright—a prize which has eluded Conservatives since 1992.

In his speech on October 10th, Mr Cameron sought to address these concerns in two interlinked ways. First he indulged his party in a populist, rightward feint. Then, more subtly, he set out to redefine his centrist, “modernising” agenda in a way that made it more appealing to the party’s traditionalists.

Although Mr Cameron did not promise what many Tories really want—a specific “in or out” pledge on EU membership—he did preside over a notably more right-wing conference than last year. Chris Grayling, the new justice secretary, emphasised the right for householders to defend themselves fiercely against intruders without fear of prosecution. George Osborne, the chancellor, extolled “people who work hard and want to get on” and offered a scheme in which employers would exchange employment rights for shares in small businesses. Ideas like this particularly appeal to hardliners who dislike penal liberalism and decry union influence and red tape. Mr Cameron lauded the capping of housing benefit and pledged more pressure on the work-shy.

Most of all, the prime minister tried to lay out how the compassionate conservatism he espoused in opposition relates to the deficit-cutting and often painful transformation of the welfare state that have characterised his term so far. Ministers have sometimes given the impression that they like upheaval for the sake of it, or because it fits their ideological fixation with a smaller state. A better answer to the question “why?” was one of the key aims of this year’s Tory powwow.

Shrewdly, Mr Cameron put his quest for a more responsive and efficient state in the context of globalisation and its impact. With a nod to the rise of Asia and other emerging economies, he asserted that Britain needs to “do or decline”, by changing its approach to education, state pensions and other spending, if it is to compete with ambitious countries less attached to past entitlements. This leaner, hungrier Britain was also touted as a land of opportunity. Echoing Margaret Thatcher’s push in the 1980s for a more innovative, less hidebound culture, the prime minister sought to revive the idea of an “aspiration nation”.

A truce in the class war

Some fretfulness still showed. Modernising Tories are on the whole a rather posh bunch and have failed to counter the impression that they are a privileged, even arrogant caste—a sense reinforced after a senior frontbencher allegedly called two policemen in Downing Street “plebs”. To counter this impression, Mr Cameron talked earnestly of spreading the educational advantages he had enjoyed himself (while avoiding naming his private school, Eton). More daringly, in front of a tax-averse party, he boasted that the rich would pay more tax under him than they did under Labour. Dispelling what he called the “cartoon version” of grasping, cold-hearted individualists is always hard for leaders from the right. Drawing on his experience with his handicapped son and his own father’s disability, he made a soundly unsentimental attempt to do so.

Summarising what you are trying to do as prime minister and tying those objectives into a coherent whole is a testing part of the job in trying times. In Birmingham, Mr Cameron showed that he appreciates the urgency of this task. Despite the starry appeal of a challenger who might one day be Tory kingpin, he reignited the faith of his own side. The tale of how to revive post-crash Britain is still his to tell for some time to come.