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Portland



Political Notebook by George Pascoe-Watson

Gordon Brown has survived the latest - and last - coup attempt, as predicted by Portland's Political Notebook in November.

We revealed the PM was certain to face an attempt to unseat him six weeks ago.

And on Tuesday I was told Geoff Hoon, the former defence secretary and Chief Whip, was "on manoeuvres".

Labour MPs are now furious with what they are calling the "Laurel and Hardy" coup - that's another fine mess they've got themselves in.

Mr Hoon insists privately he and Patricia Hewitt had a second wave of attack planned for Wednesday evening - if Gordon Brown failed to raise the support of his Cabinet.

I'm told he and Pat Hewitt were due to take to the airwaves and call for Mr Brown to step down if no Cabinet ministers of substance could be found to support him.

The darkest time for the Premier came on Wednesday afternoon when Cabinet heavyweights decided not to rush to the TV studios to defend him.

I spoke to a number of them, holed up in their departments and Commons offices, and all had decided to let events play out - que sera sera.

But there is no doubt Mr Brown and his immediate team persuaded them, one by one, to back him by offering trinkets.

What was promised in return for their loyalty remains to be seen - but carrots were dangled in return for public support.

Once again, Labour's unfailing sentimentality let them down.

Say what you want about the Tories, but they do political assassination with professional zeal. But Labour haven't got the guts to grab the dagger and plunge it.

It is now clear Labour will go into the May 6 general election with a badly wounded leader who few, if any, of them support.

The obvious winner is David Cameron whose best bet for victory is a rival lacking any support from his own team.

Yet why is the Conservative Party poll lead sticking stubbornly around the 10% mark?

This is the alarm bell which has been ringing in Mr Cameron's ears for at least a year now.

I briefed the shadow Cabinet nearly a year ago in a northern hotel about the need to focus relentlessly on reaching out to the voting public.

In those days, they were already enjoying a healthy poll lead of between 14% and 18%.



My warning to them - endorsed by Mr Cameron - was that they needed to work harder to sustain that lead because Labour's core 33% support would eventually return.

Tory chiefs are less worried than you might think.

They will do well in marginal seats where they are fighting Labour, who have done very well in the last three elections from people voting tactically to keep the Conservatives out.

Many of those voters are not natural Labour supporters and most have purged their hatred of the Tories - and the Conservatives can probably bank those seats.

So now we know.

David Miliband - who eventually issued a lukewarm statement supporting Labour, but not Gordon Brown, after six missing hours on Wednesday - remains the most likely next Labour leader.

Meanwhile strategists at Westminster are wondering - is there a chance of a six week election campaign in 2010 to mirror John Major's ill-fated 1997 crusade?

Most election campaigns last just three weeks.

But the PM might judge that constant campaigning against David Cameron for six long weeks might just break his Tory rival.

Who'd bet against a mid-March Budget, a rosy picture, some giveaways to Middle England, followed by an immediate trip to Buckingham Palace to ask The Queen to dissolve Parliament?

Ps: just for the record, here's how we predicted the Laurel and Hardy coup
November 18th 2009

Gordon Brown unveils his election strategy in today's Queen's Speech - but he's facing a New Year's Eve headache with a strong chance of a leadership bid in January.

My sources tell me there's a serious rebellion brewing in Labour's ranks and plotters have earmarked January for their final attempt at a coup.