

Political Notebook by George Pascoe-Watson

David Cameron marks his 44th birthday tomorrow and he has much to celebrate after a hectic party conference season.

His "it takes two" speech to the Tory faithful in Birmingham went down a storm with his party and the media.

His controversial move to axe child benefit for the middle classes has won widespread polling approval, despite the howls from the middle classes in the media.

Labour are horribly split under a leader who ruthlessly ended his brother's political career and seized the party crown without the support of his own MPs.

And the coalition seems to be thriving as the nation awaits the life-saving surgery about to be carried out by Chancellor George Osborne on October 20.

Mr Cameron bent over backwards to ensure his new best friend Nick Clegg enjoyed a trouble-free LibDem conference in Liverpool.

Keeping the LibDems on board and ensuring Mr Clegg's successful leadership is vital to the coalition's survival.

Denying Labour the centre ground of British politics is the ambition and right now, Mr Cameron seems capable of meeting his target.

Labour's rally in Manchester felt like an intrusion into private grief.

And now we have a shadow Cabinet in place which asks many more questions than it answers.

Alan Johnson is a very capable and amiable man. He is fine company and I have admiration for his tenacity and for his common sense.

But I am told he did not want to be shadow Chancellor because of the enormous amounts of work involved in bringing him up to speed on the numbers.

In 11 days' time AJ will have to lead Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition in response to George Osborne's savage public spending cuts.

He must know the numbers, where the big hits are likely and who will suffer within moments of the Chancellor leaving the Despatch Box.

Failure to lay a glove on Mr Osborne will be a huge boost to the Tories and leave Labour feeling drastically underpowered in an era of austerity.

These things matter. Backbenchers are desperate to cheer for their man like supporters at a boxing match.

Going home empty-handed knocks the spirit out of a party.

Yvette Cooper taking on William Hague doesn't seem right to me.

For starters, she voted, rightly in my view, for the Iraq War and has now been forced to “recalibrate” her position saying no WMD was found, “therefore we were wrong about that”.

She is a talent but is wasted taking on the foreign affairs brief when, for the foreseeable future, there can be little disagreement between the parties on the main issues.

Mr Hague is under orders to keep a lid firmly on Europe so there are few obvious areas of contention.

Ed Balls - whether you like him or loathe him - is the man the Tories truly feared.

Sure, they could and would have poked fun at him but Mr Balls knows the Treasury inside out.

He may be wrong on opposing the need to cut the deficit (most analysts think he’s in denial) but nonetheless, he is a first class campaigner who would put runs on the board for Labour.

Home Secretary Theresa May could find it hard going up against Mr Balls who is a frantic menace to his opponents and who has a well-oiled political machine at his disposal.

Not everything is running on rails for Mr Cameron, though.

Liam Fox believes he has become the standard bearer on the right of his party and will go on fighting for more defence loot.

His friends see him as untouchable but I’m not so sure. The PM is a ruthlessly efficient leader.

Relations between the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary are not good. It’s hard to see anyone but the Chancellor coming out on top.

Mutterings on the backbenches are growing into fairly loud voices. Good and talented people have had to take lowly PPS jobs as glorified bag-handlers to their bosses.

They’ve had to make way for LibDem counterparts and most believe their chances of making the Cabinet is now over - thanks to the Liberals.

These are not happy MPs and they bitterly resent surrendering their careers to their sworn enemies.

LibDem backbenchers are also struggling to keep it together.

And that’s before they are forced to explain and justify to their constituents why services are being axed locally.

Did they really go into politics for this?

ENDS

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