



A conference to remember

Harold Macmillan's resignation in 1963 plunged the Conservative conference into chaos, as rivals scrambled for supremacy and old alliances broke down. By the end of the week, one man was left standing. **Lord Lexden** looks back on a dramatic few days of Tory party history

The 83rd annual Conservative Party Conference opened in Blackpool on Wednesday, 9th October 1963. Unionists from Scotland and Northern Ireland mingled happily with Conservatives from England and Wales, their fellow party members, in a gathering of some 3,000. A convivial informality prevailed: Cabinet ministers who wanted to make confidential telephone calls had to use the scrambler phone placed in the television room at the main conference hotel.

There were no pushy lobbyists, no public relations executives, no trade stands.



Alec Douglas-Home leaves Buckingham Palace after being invited to form a government following the resignation of Harold Macmillan

They had not yet been invented. Almost the only outsiders were the representatives of the media, who were always admitted in the hope that their reports would convey an impression of Tory unity and strength to the country at large. That was particularly important in October 1963, with the Tories trailing Labour in the opinion polls and a general election no more than a year away. The

“ Hours of rumour and speculation were followed by remarkable scenes of drama, when the hall fell silent to hear the Prime Minister’s resignation letter ”

current party policy, and all but a handful of Empire Loyalists were expected to conform. A triumphant climax seemed assured on Saturday 12th when, in accordance with hallowed custom, the Prime Minister Harold Macmillan would

traditional stage management of the conference proceedings was undertaken with particular care to prevent public expression of dissent from

arrive to be greeted as a conquering hero and bring the conference to a conclusion. His mastery of platform oratory could be relied on to send the party faithful back to their constituencies with words of inspiration ringing in their ears.

Rarely have carefully laid conference plans been more spectacularly upset. Gloom descended on Blackpool even before the conference opened. A young holidaymaker was drowned in the sea opposite the conference hotel. The arrival of the party faithful coincided with calamitous news from Downing Street where Macmillan had been suddenly



Lord Home leaves Downing Street after talks on the formation of a new government

the equivalent of an American presidential nominating convention.

The circumstances were unparalleled and, to make matters even more difficult, there were no customary processes which could now be reactivated. Each change of leadership in the past had been settled in a different way. But even if there had been established conventions of behaviour it is unlikely that they would have restrained the most flamboyant of the candidates for the succession, Quintin Hogg, Lord Hailsham. That evening, after delivering a stern intellectual address to the only Tory think-tank then in existence, the Conservative Political Centre, Hailsham electrified his large audience by announcing that he intended to disclaim his peerage. What followed struck one Times journalist as “more like a Nuremberg rally” complete with “hysterical and weeping women”. “Q” for Quintin badges were pinned on everyone in sight. One of them was affixed to the ample bottom of the Lord Chancellor.

This outbreak of populist emotion horrified the party grandees accustomed to keeping the conference under firm control. Hailsham destroyed his chances of the leadership at the very outset of his campaign for it. Watching events from his hospital bed in London, Macmillan noted

struck down by severe prostate trouble which required an immediate operation, even though there was no sign of cancer. His doctors assured him that he would make a swift and full recovery, but he immediately decided to resign, using the short-lived health crisis as a pretext to quit an office in which he no longer felt confident of achieving success.

In Blackpool many hours of rumour and speculation were followed by remarkable scenes of high drama when in the late afternoon of Thursday 10th the hall fell silent to hear the contents of the first (and

so far only) resignation letter sent by a party leader to a party conference. The letter had been brought from London by Lord (Alec) Home who now read it in his capacity as that year’s President of the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, the body responsible for organising conference. Macmillan told his followers that “it will not be possible for me to carry the physical burden of leading the party at the next election”, and proposed that “the customary processes of consultation” should be carried out to find a successor. The conference was promptly turned into



Acting Prime Minister R.A. Butler arrives at Number 10 for the first Cabinet meeting following Macmillan’s resignation

that Hailsham, hitherto his favourite for the succession, had “put himself out of court by his stupid behaviour”.

The contest seemed to lie effectively between the wily, hugely experienced Rab Butler and the young, immensely clever Reggie Maudling. In the feverish atmosphere that now existed, the reception given to their speeches became much more significant than they could have imagined when they wrote them several days earlier. Both were judged as flops. On the new (and to many Tories deeply shocking) satirical TV programme, *That Was The Week That Was*, Bernard Levin was scathing about Maudling’s effort: “if not the dullest speech in history, it would do until the dullest was made”. Rab Butler, who replaced Macmillan in Saturday’s grand finale, produced a fine, wide-ranging text: like many excellent drafts it failed because of uninspired delivery.

It has come to be widely believed that Macmillan, disillusioned with his

candidate Hailsham, “switched peers” during these Blackpool days and became, in effect, Alec Home’s campaign manager, not least to keep Butler out. What actually happened is that Home, a truly reluctant candidate, began to see that he was more likely to be more acceptable to the party as a whole than anyone else. The conference reinforced that impression. His speech on foreign affairs on Friday 11th was rapturously received. The BBC commented that “in another day of hectic lobbying here in Blackpool he’s now emerged as the man who may be drafted into the premiership to break the deadlock”. Exactly a week later on October 18th the premiership of Sir Alec Douglas-Home began. 🏰

Lord Lexden is a Conservative peer and the party’s official historian. He is grateful to Jeremy McIlwaine, the Conservative Party Archivist, for his help. You can read more about the Tory succession crisis fifty years ago in the new issue of the *Conservative History* journal



Macmillan leaves King Edward VII Hospital following a successful operation for prostatic obstruction

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