

Flannel or facts: the making of the Tory manifesto

By Peter Stothard

In the middle of last week, while the newspapers were filling up with "secret" Tory plans to put strikers in jail, tie mothers to the kitchen sink and minimize the welfare state, a revealing exchange took place between three men who, each in their different ways, are intimately concerned with the final shape of the Conservative election manifesto. They were Ferdinand Mount, head of the Prime Minister's Downing Street Policy Unit, Peter Cropper, head of the Conservative Research Department, and Alfred Sherman, director of studies at the Centre for Policy Studies.

On this occasion their subject was not content but form, not the "shock" issues that were shaking the feature writers of Fleet Street but the problem of what kind of manifesto was best for ensuring Mrs Thatcher's second term. Should it be long, detailed, full and, as far as possible, honest about the Government's real intentions? Or should it be fuzzy, fudged, relying more on the Prime Minister's personality than on radical policies?

Over the coming weeks nine official committees will be reporting to Sir Geoffrey Howe, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Cecil Parkinson, the Conservative Party chairman. Other, less official committees will be chipping in their ideas for a draft manifesto under subject headings as far apart as defence and personal savings, city transport and the EEC. But there is increasing doubt - in some quarters close to disillusion - about how much, if any, of this hard-slogged advice will be heeded when the final drafters get to work for the campaign itself.

If Mr Mount has his way the manifesto will be packed with radical policies to the limits of political tolerance. He is the architect of the family policy group whose work was leaked to *The Guardian* last week. His job in Downing Street, inherited from Sir John Hoskyns, the arch-critic of Whitehall, has reinforced his view that the Civil Service is a massive obstacle to change and that a clear manifesto mandate for a new policy is crucial to making the mandarins jump. Mr Sherman's view was similar. He saw a full manifesto as a necessary loop around the fingers of impotent department heads, something that can be tugged when necessary to bring a backsliding minister back to the party line.

From Mr Cropper, however, there came a very different voice. He is a former political adviser to the Chancellor of the Exchequer and speaks for a growing number of Conservative Central Office workers whose first thought is how to fight the election and win - not how to govern afterwards. He argued last week that to produce a full radical manifesto was simply to hand ammunition to Labour.

There were about 50 Conservative MPs, MEPs, lobbyists and businessmen who last autumn received a "strictly confidential" letter from Sir Geoffrey Howe, asking them to serve on a committee "to identify programmes and measures for the second term of office of the present administration". The committees and their chairman were to be as follows: Tim Renton MP, the committee on employment; Keith Wickenden MP the promotion of enterprise and new business; Tim Sainsbury MP, the inner cities; Terence Higgins MP, the interplay of tax and social security; Lord Beloff, the quality of education; Lady Young, the promotion of family life; Lord Thomas of Swynerton, the EEC; Tim Eggar MP, the nationalized industries; and John Lee MP, urban transport.

Such style of consultation is

unusual for the Tory party which normally keeps the writing of the manifesto unashamedly to a small group around the leader. Consequently there was uncertainty from the start - and some ill-feeling. Some of the chairmen were noted "wets". Was the whole exercise just a sop to dissident feelings? Why had precedence not been given to experienced members of the party's specialist backbench committees? What was the relation between these new committees and policy groups already being run by, for example, the Centre for Policy Studies?

Then there was the role of the Chancellor and other Cabinet ministers. At the September Cabinet meeting that had led to the "shelving" of the notorious Think Tank report on the dismantling of the welfare state, Sir Geoffrey had warned his colleagues of the dangers of making policy pledges on the assumption of continuing economic growth. Was Sir Geoffrey's role that of policeman or innovator? Did he intend to use the groups to "bounce" certain Cabinet colleagues out of the positions preferred by them and their departments? Were ministers supposed to get involved with the committees themselves?

The whole process was likened by one close observer to President Carter's discarded scheme for deploying America's strategic missiles: "Some empty silos are sited so as to encourage your friends, some so as to confuse your enemies, and only a very few to do a real job of launching a live attack when the war comes". In the category of virtually empty consultation exercises he placed the Sainsbury committee on the inner cities, the Young committee on the family and the Renton committee on the unions. There were some hopes of action from the Eggar and Higgins groups. Lord Thomas's investigation into Europe was almost certainly the most "live" area at the moment.

The European issue has long been identified as a potential electoral problem for the Government. Central to it is the fact that while the party line, and especially the line of the party's business paymasters is strongly pro-Europe, the instincts of the Prime Minister are not. Labour

will campaign for withdrawal and Mrs Thatcher will be loath to see Mr Foot take all the anti-European cards. What she wants is a formula for British-led reform that can be married - in however shotgun a fashion - to the ritual confirmation of Britain's European commitment.

The task of achieving this went first to the so-called Utley group under the chairmanship of *The Daily Telegraph* leader writer T. E. Utley. This produced a mildly nationalist-sounding report which had the approval of Francis Pym, the Foreign Secretary, but did not go far enough for the Chancellor who asked the Prime Minister's foreign affairs adviser and historian Lord Thomas to take up the baton.

Some of Thomas's current views on Europe are contained in a pamphlet which he published last week under the title *Our Place in the World*. He is essentially sceptical of any but the economic aspects of the community. He is distrustful of the joint European political activities by which the Foreign Office sets such store. As for the pressures from industrialists to set common product standards, he writes that "it would be absurd if, in the face of our generation's growing scepticism of state interference at home we were to accept heavy doses of collectivism from a *dirigiste* commission in Brussels, even if disguised by the mellifluous word 'harmonization'".

Before some discreet doctoring by the Foreign Office, Thomas's paper was apparently still more barbed in its opinions of Britain's European zealots. Alongside Thomas, however, the Chancellor appointed to the new policy committee six men of more traditionalist persuasion: two MPs, David Myles and Michael Latham, two MEPs, Sir Henry Plumb and Sir Frederick Warner, and two industrialists, Ronald Halstead, the chairman of Beecham (who is very keen on "harmonization") and Laurence Kelly of the British Steel Consumers' Council.

Not surprisingly the group got off to a sticky start. There was some dissatisfaction at the chairman's habit of seeing key witnesses, including Britain's Brussels representative Sir Michael Butler and David Hancock, the European

budget expert in the Cabinet Office, without any other member of the group present. Later, however, committee members had joint sessions with junior ministers Nicholas Ridley from the Foreign Office and Norman Lamont from the Department of Industry. At a meeting three weeks ago, organized by the Institute of Directors so that it could put its own case for EEC reform, Thomas and Sir Henry Plumb heard some unusually frank views from Foreign Office Minister, Douglas Hurd, and Trade Minister, Peter Rees.

Hurd, for example, criticized the calibre of the present EEC Commission compared to the one which had been headed by Roy Jenkins. He asked for ideas on how member states could be encouraged to make higher calibre appointments and spoke of the danger that the British civil servants who were prepared to go to Brussels were the second-raters. Both Hurd and Rees discussed ways in which more British pressure might be brought to bear on the Commission. And Rees had to argue strongly that it would be retrograde to cut back on the Commission's powers even though he was dissatisfied with the quality of both its personnel and its ideas. This Institute of Directors' conference seems to have been one successful consultation exercise. The IoD call for greater British leadership towards EEC reform may even strike the right sort of note for Mrs Thatcher's manifesto. Certainly the involvement of ministers, though not yet the Foreign Secretary, is an important tactical plus for Lord Thomas's committee.

All the committees - whether they are in charge of a live issue or an empty silo - have to produce a report for Adam Ridley, the Chancellor's political adviser in the Treasury, by the end of March. Ridley will then put them together into a single document for discussion by Howe, Parkinson and Mount. It need not go beyond that stage to the full Cabinet, whose departments have also all been asked for their ideas, until the Prime Minister has a firmer view of the election date. The results will be ready for a June poll but, if anything, Mrs Thatcher seems now more than ever concerned to keep open the option of staying on until spring 1984.

The manifesto committees are undoubtedly a frustrating and paradoxical exercise for some of those who have been called on to serve. An impending election has a generally depressing effect on the enactment of more extreme government policies. Ravenscraigs are left open. Serpell Reports are quietly swept to the side. The boat is left as far as possible unrocked. If "wet" committee members feel they have been offered only consultative sops, many on the right feel that they are being asked for ideas for a second term at the same time as the commitments for the first term are being fudged out of sight. And everywhere the party managers seem more concerned about the dangers of dramatic leaks from their multiplicity of think tanks than they are interested in what they might actually say in their reports.

The Conservatives will campaign as a radical party - for greater educational choice, rights for individual trade unionists, competition in place of state monopoly, more council house sales. But for the ideal of a manifesto packed with new mandates to beat the mandarins, the prospects look doubtful. The closer the election comes, the more must the initiative move away from the would-be governors and towards the winners of votes.

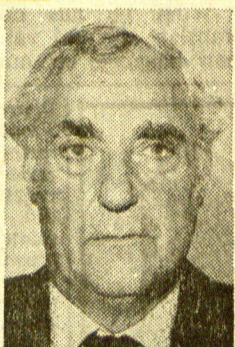
The European group



Lord Thomas



Michael Latham MP



Sir Frederick Warner



Ronald Halstead



Sir Henry Plumb



David Myles MP

Making the manifesto

From Mr Alfred Sherman

Sir, I am sorry, but views and acts ascribed to me by Peter Stothard in *The Times* of February 23 ("Flannel or facts: the making of the Tory manifesto") are the diametrical opposite of the facts as I explained then to him, in simple terms.

1. I do not regard a manifesto "as a necessary loop around the fingers of impotent department heads, something that can be tugged when necessary". That, as I explained to Mr Stothard, is the received wisdom.

2. Far from being "intimately concerned with the final shape of the Conservative election manifesto", I am, as far as I know, not directly involved.

3. His report of my meeting with Peter Cropper and Ferdie Mount is false. The matter of policy groups working on the manifesto came up at one lunch among a host of other matters, but I certainly do not remember discussing either its form or content, as distinct from who would be involved in gathering inputs, and how.

Yours faithfully,
ALFRED SHERMAN,
Director of Studies,
Centre for Policy Studies,
8 Wilfred Street, SW1.
February 28.

4/3/83