

'If I became a liability . . . I would leave immediately'

Parkinson's affair cost him Foreign Secretary's post

● Mrs Thatcher decided soon after the election not to appoint Mr Parkinson foreign secretary after he had made his position clear.

● Mr Parkinson said on BBC's *Panorama* that he would not resign unless he "ceased to be an asset to the Government"

● A National Opinion Poll for the *Daily Mail*, taken before the Parkinson controversy, shows the Conservatives with 37 per cent, Labour 32, Alliance 19, others 2.

● An ideological rift has emerged in the party after the leak of a report into infiltration by right-wing extremists.

From Julian Haviland and Philip Webster, Blackpool

Mr Cecil Parkinson would have been Foreign Secretary but for his affair with his former secretary.

It was the post he most wanted, and Mrs Margaret Thatcher gave him a positive indication several weeks before the general election that he was her preferred choice. She had already resolved to dismiss Mr Francis Pym.

The picture changed within an hour or two of the polls closing on June 9, when the Prime Minister and her successful party chairman discussed his future. Mr Parkinson then told her for the first time how he was placed, and her immediate response was that he could not, after all, take over the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

But Mrs Thatcher made clear that she meant to give him a Cabinet post, and a few days later she appointed him Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. Sir Geoffrey Howe became Foreign Secretary instead.

Her determination that Mr Parkinson should not resign or be forced out of office is founded in part on the fact that, in losing the senior and coveted

post of Foreign Secretary, he has already paid a high price for his indiscretion.

Not all members of Mrs Thatcher's Cabinet were aware until recently of that sequence of events. But those who were appreciate the Prime Minister's staunch support for their colleague, and hope that the Conservative party will demonstrate that they share that view when the party's annual conference opens at Blackpool today.

As delegates gathered last night there were indeed signs that key figures in the party were rallying to Mr Parkinson's support.

Mr John Selwyn Gummer, the new party chairman who succeeded Mr Parkinson last month, was cheered by a gathering of 250 Conservative party agents when he praised warmly the work of his predecessor.

Mr Gummer later told a press conference that he wholly backed the Prime Minister's statement that Mr Parkinson would continue to be Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

The Chairman of the Conservative's National Union Executive Committee, Sir Rus-

sell Sanderson, spoke of the "great sadness" felt by the party, and he added: "We in this party do not turn out our friends just like that, even when they come on hard times."

The regular pre-conference gathering of the press was dominated by questions on Mr Parkinson and his future, and Sir Russell's attempt to arouse reporters' interest in today's debates on crime and on rate reform were not successful.

The press was mildly rebuked for overstating Mr Parkinson's difficulties with the party.

Mr Michael Spicer, deputy chairman, said that 90 per cent of telephone calls received yesterday by the party had been in support of Mr Parkinson.

But the party hierarchy remained nervous last night about how Mr Parkinson will be received when he arrives in Blackpool on Thursday to answer a debate about the encouragement of free enterprise and the reduction of public sector monopolies. Their nervousness will not end until the conference finishes on Friday with the Prime Minister's address.

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Under fire: Mr Cecil Parkinson answering questions about his future on BBC's *Panorama*, last night

Sir Ralph Richardson dies after brief illness

Cashless EEC puts off £240m payout

From Ian Murray, Athens

The EEC yesterday ran out of money as the Community will just

Parkinson affair cost him top job

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Mrs Thatcher herself, who at first planned to reach Blackpool tomorrow, unexpectedly arrived at her hotel last night.

Her aides said that she felt she would be better able to read the party's mood by mingling with her supporters.

Mr Gummer told the agents meeting that the central office he inherited from Mr Parkinson was a "very happy ship, well organized and highly professional".

"I want to say clearly that I have no doubt on whose shoulders the praise for that should lie and that is my predecessor, Cecil Parkinson", he added.

The party owed much to Mr Parkinson, not only for his ability as chairman but for the enthusiasm which he communicated to party workers and to the membership as a whole.

Mr Gummer said that there was much to be done at the conference. "We are not going to be deflected from doing it by those who do not support this party, nor are members of it."

Referring to the publicity over the Parkinson affair and the investigation of right-wing infiltration Mr Gummer said that the Conservatives were used to a "flurry" at the beginning of their conferences and referred to the "ancient British habit of trying to undermine success".

At the press conference Sir Russell said: "Some people, particularly some sections of the press, seem to think that because Mr Parkinson has fallen on hard times, and he has, that we should all denigrate what has happened and throw him over."

"It is not the way we do it in this party. I am sorry but it is not."

"That seems to me to be wholly clear and unambiguous and I support it utterly", Mr Gummer said. He added that the Prime Minister had also said it was a private matter and should remain so and that was why he had not commented on it.

Mr Gummer said that he had heard nothing to give credence to suggestions that there was a large number of people calling for the resignation of Mr Parkinson.

Pressed on detailed aspects of the affair Mr Gummer refused to comment any further, saying it was a private matter and remained so.

He acknowledged that the press appeared to be concerned with no other issue. "You have not been asking me about the

Today's debates

Debates today will be headed by those on law and order, in which Mr Leon Brittan, the Home Secretary, will be speaking, and on rates, in which Mr Patrick Jenkin, Secretary of State for the Environment, will reply to calls for legislation to change the existing rating system.

Other debates will be on taxation, in which Mr Peter Rees, Chief Secretary to the Treasury, might comment on public expenditure, on homes and land, and on energy.

Mr John Selwyn Gummer, the new party chairman, will speak this morning.

election victory or about our programme. You have only been asking about one subject."

Repeatedly pressed he said: "I am not going to discuss the situation of Mr Parkinson, except to say he has been an excellent chairman of the party and that I am very pleased he is and will continue to be Secretary of State for Trade and Industry".

Mr Parkinson made it clear in an interview on BBC's *Panorama* programme that he would not resign unless he ceased to be an asset.

"I just make one point. The Prime Minister appoints all ministers and if I ever ceased to be an asset and became a liability, and the Prime Minister felt so, then of course I would leave immediately."

He added that he had not left the party chairmanship some weeks ago as a precaution against the publication of accounts of his liaison with Miss Sara Keays.

Asked whether he would continue as overlord of trade and industry or resign, Mr Parkinson said: "Yes. I will continue. I intend to continue in office."

He said that he had had hundreds of letters from people all over Britain including 70 from parliamentary colleagues urging him not to resign, and 26 letters which said he should resign.

Mr Parkinson refused to reply to questions about when he told Mrs Thatcher about his affair.

"I have had a number of private conversations with her which remain private."

● An emergency motion calling for the resignation of Mr Parkinson was decisively rejected by the Oxford Union last night (the Press Association reports). Geoffrey Smith, page 2

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