

PRIME MINISTER

I thought you should see two pieces from last Monday's Independent.

I myself think it is nothing but mischief by Anthony Bevins. This view is shared by Cranley Onslow, to whom I have spoken. Of course, it is theoretically possible for someone to stand against you, but he has not even heard that anyone is considering doing so..

Delia

pp

MARK LENNOX-BOYD

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MB

Thatcher may be challenged as Tory leader

A LEADERSHIP challenge to Margaret Thatcher is being actively considered by some Conservative MPs. They would run a "stalking horse" candidate to test the level of party dissatisfaction with the Prime Minister's performance.

The Independent has been told that at least one senior backbencher, a former junior minister, is willing to stand against her. It is said that Mrs Thatcher has been made aware of the possibility.

An election, in which the vote is restricted to the party's 373 MPs, would be held within a month of the opening of the new session of Parliament in November.

There is no question of any of the leading contenders for the Conservative succession putting up, and reports of "secret plots to oust Maggie" with the backing of senior ministers such as Sir Geoffrey Howe, Leader of the Commons, are unfounded. Nevertheless, some MPs believe that if a "dummy candidate" managed to pick up as many as 75 votes, there would be speculation about the support that could be attracted by more serious candidates such as Sir Geoffrey, Kenneth Baker, the new chairman of the party, or Michael Heseltine, the former Secretary of State for Defence.

At the very least, it is believed that as many as 50 Tory MPs could vote against Mrs Thatcher. Their motives range from long-term opposition to "gung-ho" Thatcherite policies, hostility to her anti-libertarian tendencies, and even the frustrated ambition of men and women who have been sacked or overlooked in ministerial reshuffles.

The peremptory dismissal of Sir Geoffrey as Foreign Secretary in last month's reshuffle managed to bring together all those elements of unhappiness, and Mrs Thatcher's critics hope that she will now mend her ways in the wake of the public display of backbench support for Sir Geoffrey in the Commons.

For the moment, with the House in recess, they are biding

By Anthony Bevins
Political Editor

their time. But it is said that if Mrs Thatcher shows no sign of a change of pace or style, either at the party conference in October or in the Queen's Speech setting out the legislative programme for the new session, a challenge would be on the cards.

Although there is considerable unhappiness in the party about the level of inflation, proposals for the National Health Service, and the classroom impact of changes in education, one of the first indicators of Mrs Thatcher's mood could be on the poll tax, which is being introduced in England and Wales next April.

While some critics want changes made in the safety net arrangements, which adversely affect a number of Conservative constituencies, others want a more far-reaching change, such as taking education out of local authority budgets.

But dissidents hold out little hope of any change of heart by Mrs Thatcher. In her end-of-term address to the backbench 1922 committee in the Commons, her message was that the party must grit its teeth and move on regardless of mid-term blues. She told MPs they had been through difficult patches before, and had won through in the end. It is that sense of intractability that is feeding talk of a challenge. Mrs Thatcher has been re-elected unopposed every year since she took over from Edward Heath in 1975.

Under party rules, any challenger would be required to sign his or her nomination paper, and get the backing of two supporters. Nominations would close on a Thursday, with a secret ballot of MPs the following Tuesday.

The winner requires a clear majority of those entitled to vote, and 15 per cent more of the votes of those entitled to vote than any other candidate; 215 votes are needed for outright victory.

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THE INDEPENDENT

40 CITY ROAD, LONDON EC1Y 2DB (telephone 01-253-1222; telex 9419611 INDPNT)

Rumble of a Tory rebellion

THE NEWS that Margaret Thatcher may face an election for the leadership of the Conservative Party is one of the strongest signs yet of dissatisfaction among her own backbenchers. She has not been challenged for the post since she herself defeated Edward Heath in 1975. If she wishes, she can almost certainly prevent a contest this autumn, when the annual opportunity for one occurs, by adopting a conciliatory tone in her speech to the party conference in October, and by excluding aggressive proposals from the Queen's Speech in November. But the fact that an election is even considered possible indicates how serious the discontent has become.

The most her critics can hope for on this occasion is to clip her wings, not to drive her out. Apart from anything else, they would be incapable of agreeing on a replacement. The candidate who has expressed a willingness to run against her is a former junior minister rather than a serious rival such as Michael Heseltine. The ballot of all Tory MPs which the challenge would precipitate would be the perfect opportunity for a sizeable minority of rebels to record their dissent without risk of reprisal from the Whips, since the voting would be in secret. It would not be designed to elevate the former junior minister to the premiership.

Mrs Thatcher's position can therefore be argued to be as strong as ever. If she trims her sails, there will be no contest. If she declines to do so, she will still be able to win the resulting leadership election, barring some unexpected political catastrophe in the

months before it is held. Having won it, she would be safe from internal challenge for some time, since the autumn of next year would be too close to the general election for Conservative MPs to risk splitting the party. If she lost the general election she would indeed become vulnerable, just as Mr Heath did after his defeats in 1974. But if she won, her removal would again be near-impossible.

Yet if the Prime Minister makes this reassuring analysis and leaves it at that, she will be missing the point. Much is made of loyalty to the leader as a characteristic of the Conservative Party. It is not, however, an unconditional loyalty. It is a means to an end: winning general elections. Discontent has broken out in the parliamentary party because MPs are no longer confident that Mrs Thatcher knows how to win the next election. They think that by listening to clever but politically inept advisers, and adopting at their behest such unpopular policies as the poll tax and water privatisation, she has substantially worsened the party's prospects.

Nor, the dissident backbenchers argue, has the Cabinet exercised enough of a restraining influence on her. Sir Geoffrey Howe may have prevailed upon her to accept a compromise for the Madrid summit of the European Community in June, but what became of him? He was sacked and fobbed off with a bogus title. His shabby treatment provoked much sympathy in the parliamentary party, and a loss of trust in Mrs Thatcher. If she cannot carry her own MPs with her, she will find it much harder to carry the country when the time comes.