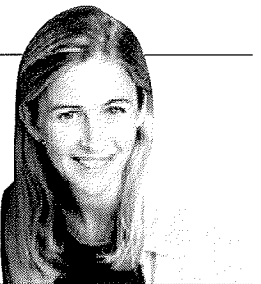


Opinion

The British are increasingly bad at giving birth

Alice Thomson, page 26



At last, bright ideas, not dreary soundbites

Our sense of hopelessness about the state of politics is misplaced. The Tories are coming up with thoughtful policies

Anatole Kaletsky



What makes this miserable British summer even worse than the weather or the baleful economic news is the sense of hopelessness — the feeling that the country is politically leaderless and that nobody has any credible policies for dealing with the problems ahead.

Not only do we have an incompetent and confused Prime Minister leading a feeble and exhausted Government for an interminable lame-duck period, but the Opposition is almost as bad, seeming to be nothing more than a frothy public relations concoction, attractive enough on the surface, but totally devoid of any coherent ideology or serious ideas.

That, at least, is the dinner-party consensus in Westminster. Not even lifelong Labour loyalists expect a recovery for the Government, with or without Gordon Brown. But universal disdain for the Government does not translate into enthusiasm — or even respect — for the Opposition.

A typical example of this despair was a leading article in the *Financial Times* on Tuesday, denouncing both main parties' populist response to the oil crisis. The Tories have proposed reducing fuel duties, while Labour has hinted at postponing increases announced in the Budget — both motivated by crude electioneering

with no economic justification, in the paper's view: "The Government should press ahead with increases in fuel duty [but will probably not do so]. Meanwhile, the Conservatives look more and more likely to win the next election. However, with each announcement, they look less and less like a government-in-waiting."

But are the political prospects really so dismal? On the Government side, I fear that the answer is yes. At the beginning of this year Mr Brown faced several challenges on foreign policy, Europe, civil liberties, energy and transport, which I described on these pages in early January. Most merely required him to exercise some self-restraint — to close Northern Rock; to resist pointless meddling with the tax system; to distance himself from US policy in Iraq; to abandon a futile and counter-productive war against opium in Afghanistan; to drop the plan for identity cards; to refrain from bullying MPs on pre-charge detention and the European constitution. Above all, he had to stop trying to be all things to all men in an effort to dominate the newspaper headlines.

On these counts and many others, Mr Brown has chosen exactly the opposite course to the one that might have restored his political credibility. Accordingly, he has been written off even by his erstwhile supporters, among whom I would have included myself until this year.

But are the Tories as clueless as almost everyone assumes? It is fashionable to ridicule all politicians for intellectual incoherence and lacking substance. Such sneering criticism has the great advantage of making the critic seem intellectual

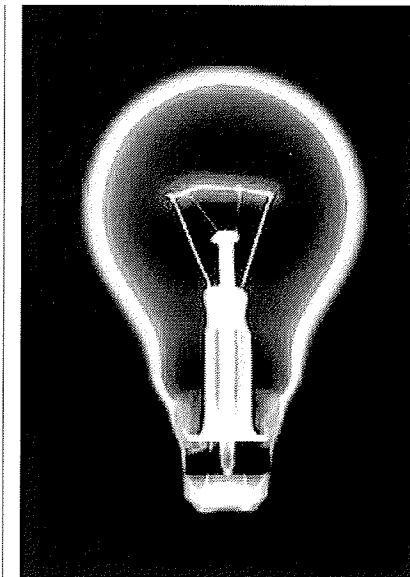
and substantial, as well as politically independent. But at the risk of appearing naive and biased, let me suggest that some of the Tories' policies stand up to scrutiny and make a lot of sense.

I am not suggesting that they have all the answers or would do a better job in government than Mr Brown. With almost two years until the next election, there will be time enough to make that assessment. All I want to do is to illustrate that politics in Britain is not completely devoid of decent ideas.

Let me begin with George Osborne's proposal to reduce fuel duty, which provoked so much derision this week, not only from the *Financial Times*. In fact, the idea of using fuel taxes to compensate for fluctuations in global oil prices — with the tax rate going down when prices shoot up, and rising when prices decline — is a good one, in terms of fiscal stability and energy security. The advantages are described in the consultation paper *A Fair Fuel Stabiliser* published by the Tories this week.

Such a regulator would help to stabilise inflation and consumer spending. But an even more important benefit would be for long-term energy security. If the Government automatically increased fuel duty whenever the oil price fell below a certain threshold, such as the \$84 a barrel used in the Tory Green Paper, it would send a powerful signal to energy users that the era of cheap fuel is permanently over and efforts to conserve energy will never again be undercut, as they were in the 1980s and 1990s, by a collapse in the price of oil.

Let me also mention two more



Enough of the gloom: the Tory Party is actually in thinking mode

Conservative policies that generated cynical headlines recently.

David Cameron's speech about our "broken society", calling for clearer judgments on what is right and wrong, was widely ridiculed for "daring to push into the perilous terrain of morality", as one commentator put it, while his suggestion of a prison sentence for people carrying concealed knives was denounced as inconsistent with the Tories' newfound respect for civil liberties and as a throwback to the right-wing extremism that lost them three elections in a row.

In a totally different field, the Tories have been ridiculed for apparent contradictions between their opposition to enlarging Heathrow airport and their

pro-business image, and their support for other unpopular infrastructure projects, such as nuclear power.

Yet there is nothing inconsistent in these positions. There is no inconsistency between traditional civil liberties — as shown by Tory opposition to 42 days' pre-charge detention and identity cards — and tougher penalties against those found guilty by the due process of law.

This is shown by the maverick position taken by David Davis against 42-day detention, despite (or perhaps because of) his even more maverick support for tough law enforcement, including the death penalty.

Neither is there anything inconsistent in pointing out, as Mr Cameron has, that further development of Heathrow as an airline hub would not be in Britain's economic interests or even in BA's.

The only inconsistency between such positions is not in their intellectual content but in the soundbites that pass for political analysis these days. Tabloid headline-writers may be at a loss to decide whether the Tories should be classed as right-wing authoritarians or woolly liberals, as traditional pro-business blues or tree-hugging greens — but these are arguments against sound-bite politics, not against the policies that the Tories have begun to develop.

Mr Cameron seems to have understood that developing policies for a complex modern society requires a synthesis of ideas from different parts of the ideological spectrum. Politics is not just a matter of inventing slogans to try to impress tabloid editors — that is the failed politics of Gordon Brown.