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**Lacklustre Conservatives must
change or die**

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Published in The Guardian

The Ford Escort was a successful model. The Mark 5 model was introduced in 1990 and sold in vast numbers. Facelifted in 1993 and 1996, the car was phased out in 2000 by which time competitor models looked a lot more attractive.

In 1999 Ford aimed the new Focus at the same market segment. The Focus was successful because it convinced buyers and experts that it was desirable.

Of course, the Conservative party does not make cars, yet as a brand it has an image every bit as powerful as any car. And as a car it would be a Ford Escort towards the end of its production run, good when first designed but overtaken by the competition.

The existing Conservative model will not get more than 35% of the votes in a general election and may suffer if the Liberal Democrats get their act together. What is required is not a minor facelift, but a complete overhaul of policy and image.

In the absence of some self-inflicted disaster by Labour the Conservatives will only challenge for power by designing a new and modern Conservative party, that not only looks new but also has exciting policies on issues that are important to voters.

Most ordinary people do not analyse the detail of competing party policy, they rely on the interpretation of knowledgeable experts. They are just as likely to vote on the basis of a more general impression that a particular party appears to be in touch with the issues that matter to them, and is on their wavelength and united in its approach. They choose also on the basis of observation of the leader's personal qualities.

In all three areas the plight of the Conservative party could hardly be worse. The News of the World poll yesterday asked which party has the best health policies. Voters put the Conservative party in last place, 22% behind Labour and 1% behind the Liberal Democrats. On education, despite Labour's problems, the Conservatives lag 17% behind Labour and only just manage to pip the Lib Dems and claim second place by 2%. On the economy, traditionally the Conservatives' great strength, Labour now leads by a whopping 19% and get a score virtually double that of the Conservatives.

The overall image of the party is dire. Voters do not believe the Tories would make the right decisions in government by a margin of 25%, that they are not in tune with issues that matter to voters by a margin of 30% and they are not united by a margin of 38%.

When asked which of the three leaders would make best prime minister, Mr Duncan Smith comes last, way behind Tony Blair and trailing behind Charles Kennedy by 5%. Only 14% of people think he would be best prime minister, a score 2% lower than achieved by William Hague in May 2001.

The image of the Tories among swing voters interviewed in focus groups confirms that while these critical waverers are disillusioned with Labour, who they perceive have not delivered key election promises, they find the Tories even less appealing.

Two key qualities emerged from groups conducted for the Sunday Telegraph as critical attributes for a modern political leader, passion and charisma. It would be impossible for any impartial observer to conclude that swing voters imagine Mr Duncan Smith has either.

Impressions of the wider Conservative party are also negative and comments made by group members unmitigatingly so. They are seen as a party of the past, containing rich old aristocrats, out of touch with the concerns of ordinary people; happy to talk among

themselves but hostile to anyone who may intrude. One-word descriptions given by the focus groups include staid, lost, boring, confused, old, searching, in limbo, stagnant and meandering.

If voters were to react immediately to these observations, the Liberal Democrats would overtake the Tories. For some time to come the Conservative share may only be sustained by the inertia of traditional voting patterns.

On the basis of research there is certainly no reason for expecting the Tories will be able to mount a serious challenge to Labour, and the Liberal Democrats look to be as well placed to capitalise on growing resentment with the government's lack of progress on key election promises.

If the Conservatives were to conclude from this that a new and modern interpretation of Conservatism is now required, where would they start with this project?

Constituency committees would have to start to select candidates more representative of Britain today, not of the existing body of Conservative MPs, and not to do so quietly but shout it out loud. With a more representative set of MPs there is a chance that the Conservatives will develop a more sympathetic style, and policies grounded in experience of what life is like in modern Britain, not as it is imagined to be.

Many senior Tories will guffaw and wonder how anyone can expect them to support a plan for the radical overhaul of their party, its policies and its personnel. Who would blame them for resisting engagement in this project?

But the uncomfortable truth for the Conservatives is that the choice has now been taken away from them. An increasing number of political journalists and independent observers echo what ordinary voters instinctively know, that the Tory party must change, or die.

Nick Sparrow is managing director of ICM Research. He has been conducting political opinion polls for The Guardian and other media organisations since 1984 and is an industry acknowledged expert on political opinion research. He won the Market Research Society Silver Medal for his work on the development of accurate opinion research, and was pollster for the Conservative Party from 1996 to 2003.

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