

Will the Tories survive their autumn conference?

Published: January 13, 2026, 11:35 am

The scale of open warfare within the cabinet at present is unprecedented within my lifetime as I recall it. The dark, dying days of the Callaghan government, the Westland affair, Thatcher's overthrow, John Major's shambles, and the coalition felt nothing like this. That Hammond and Rudd decided they could announce their positions whilst May is on holiday is the surest sign that she is indeed the lame duck prime minister I [forecast she would be](#) before she even reached office. What though are the consequences?

May survives for three reasons. The first is no Tory actually wants her job because whoever the incumbent the present prime minister is destined to be a disaster for history to recount, making Lord Notth and David Cameron look inspired by comparison.

Second, more surprisingly (perhaps) Labour really does have little idea how to oppose her, so divided is it on the same issues of Brexit.

Third, the decision can be deferred. This is the only current gain for the Tories from the June election. Because no-one has the desire for another election as yet and May chose to carry on many think the matter can be put off.

I suspect this fragile consensus will hold as yet despite the massive political in-fighting that is now apparent. The question is how long 'as yet' implies. My own instinct is it means until October. To put it another way, that means Tory party conference. However well stage managed this exercise in lauding the duly chosen 'dear leader' usually is I cannot see that veneer surviving the pressure this year. The Tory party fringe is going to be riven with open hostility. It is hard to see how that can be prevented from spilling over into public dissent. And from where the support for May will come in all this is very hard to imagine. It is very obviously absent already. In that case it will take quite extraordinarily thick skin for May to survive this.

It may also take ability beyond even the Tory instinct for power to keep the party intact as well. The Brexit hard line and Hammond pragmatic dealers seem so far apart that the chance of reconciliation appears remote in the extreme. If May cannot hold them

together, whether she's herself a lame duck or not, leaves the prospect of unity around any other candidate very hard to imagine. Cameron's ultimate failure would be a split Tory party, something not known in modern history but for which the Corn Laws provide resonant precedent. I am not, of course, sure it will happen. But I certainly think it possible. And with it the government would fall.

But that's another blog.