

Kicking off

Margaret Thatcher owed her victory to the cunning Airey Neave and the miscalculations of Tories who just wanted to give Ted Heath ‘a kick up the bum’, reports **Lord Lexden**

Airey Neave always spoke softly, as born conspirators and spies are apt to do. When I worked for him as his political adviser on Northern Ireland during the last two years of his life, the (not very remarkable) speeches I drafted for him were invariably delivered in a muffled voice in the House of Commons. Few bothered to listen.

In the late afternoon of Tuesday, 11 February 1975, Neave made his way back to his small room in an attic corridor of the Commons, where Mrs Thatcher was waiting for him. She made a note of the occasion. Neave opened the door gently, and said “so quietly, ‘I have to tell you, you are the new leader of the opposition’”.

She could not have won the leadership without him. He took over her campaign with under three weeks to go before Tory MPs were due to

vote on 4 February in the first ballot of the election to settle whether or not Ted Heath should be replaced as their leader. Until then, as she said,

“I didn’t really have a campaign.” No more than a few preliminary efforts had been made by her two parliamentary private secretaries, one of whom, Sir Fergus Montgomery, was encumbered by rumours that he had been a lover of John Vassall during the spy scandal of the Macmillan era.

On 21 January, just two weeks before the first vote, Neave set up a campaign group “formed of people of all shades of thought in the party”, as he noted in his diary.

They had just one thing in common: a determination to oust Heath. There was no agreement on the policies they wanted his successor to espouse. The group never discussed them.

While Mrs Thatcher won the praises of the largely male electorate of 277 (there were only seven female Tory MPs) with her slashing attacks on a Labour budget, Neave deployed all the conspiratorial skills he had perfected during his wartime career in the secret services after his escape from Colditz.

He won over one senior back bencher who wanted to give Heath no more than “a kick up the bum”. Later the man exploded: “That bastard Neave – he said there was no chance of her winning.”

What swung the first ballot Mrs Thatcher’s way were Neave’s whispers to those who did not much care for her that their support need not mean that they would get her as leader. It would mean only that there would be a second ballot, which would open up the field to other candidates. It was with that



Airey Neave

ruse that Neave brought her 130 votes to Heath’s 119 in the first round. The Heathite Conservative Central Office was so confident that she would be defeated that it shut up shop early. A party official noted: “Our (Polish) night-watchman obviously could not cope” with the telephone, which “was ringing continuously”.

None of the new candidates, led by Willie Whitelaw, who joined the second round stood any chance of overtaking her. The prospect of a female leader suddenly ignited great excitement in the party. Tories congratulated themselves that they were once again modernising their party, as they had done in choosing Benjamin Disraeli and Heath himself on earlier occasions.

Mrs Thatcher responded, promising “vision, purpose” and “a third thing, presentation”. Central Office was overhauled. Within three weeks, an economic and social strategy committee had been established as “the centre of the policy-making organisation”. Fifty years on, is Mrs Badenoch following this example closely enough? 🐾