

# London letter

Cian O'Neill reflects on the stranger aspects of the current conference season

It seems the sporting of tight white long-sleeved tops can be forgiven in politics, if the curious case of William Hague is anything to go by. But no pass is given to those whom the political windbags find looking funny about the face, which David Milliband did, with or without a banana in his paw. Baby brother Ed, the new Labour leader, does as he has now graciously [I guess] acknowledged resemble a Nick Park creation – Gromit abroad in Whitehall, if you will – and is barely distinguishable from Nikolai Horsetly or David Hamton in his equally squeaky, scrubbed of distinguishing features way. The three embody what now passes for the political animal in England, which is to say that they are as physically unplaceable, as preppy non plus ultra as American junior Congressmen. Try and guess their age if you will – but you'd do better trying to carbon-date plastic. No, if you must ask, none of the three young leaders have ever soiled themselves, despite how Ed holds his upper body; but then again it is probably safe to say that the Blair-tes in Labour are now doing that for him.

Amusing as it was to see Ed 'made' by Don Neil Kinnock, who smiled from the sidelines, chewing dry spaghetti in a broad valleys accent, one has to wonder what it means for the future direction of his beloved party. It might well be his last big mistake on their behalf, as it isn't simply that the unions who swung it for the winner know where the bodies are buried. No, the body in question, that of Irene Davide, was left swinging above the stage for all to see. That shall hardly play well in Middle England. Whatever, like taciturn phoenixes with 'aste fur' pie, those union men are back for the 1980s revival that ends all as the Conservatives try and outdo even Thatcher, using the initial cut on child tax credits to groom the public for that moment on October 20th when George Osborne drops his pants and everyone realises that they are most certainly not

in Kansas anymore, and that these are times for wellington boots and bomb shelters, not Jimmy Choos.

Yes, a creeping nerviness is running the streets of London and, barring the bankers, there are few smirks to be seen, which the second London Underground strike in three months did little to help. Though interestingly on neither occasion was there much grumbling from the subterraneans forced out onto the crowded pavements by the RMT and TSSA (Transport Salaried Staffs' Association). Not only do many agree with the unions that the job cuts on the already creaking underground system might not be the best idea, particularly as 'the Tube' is something of a jihadist G-spot; it feels as if people are steeling themselves for strikes to come, and they might not be wrong. Ever timely, Boris Johnson spoke in the Tory Conference in Birmingham to not only and rather curiously attack the strikes as 'blatantly political', but to propose legislation to prohibit any strike taking place without a 50% pre-ballot vote turnout. If we are to believe Johnson, a second-hand car salesman in an old school tie, the ConDem coalition are now discussing just this. Though it may be truer to say that he is simply talking up the issue to win the favour in his party that he will need for the coming 2012 'majority' rematch with Ken Ivingstone. Huff and hot air notwithstanding, the implications for capital and country are obvious and Bob Crow sought to pre-empt Boris and his friends in the Tory press by appealing directly to No. 10 to intervene in the strike. Even Trotskyite hardliners can learn the lesson of the pre-emptive PR strike – perhaps someone bought Peter Mandelson's book after all.

Johnson [admitted, that wins more laughs in America] wasn't the only bluff Tory talking things up in Birmingham. Ken Clarke, who at a Centre for Crime and Justice Studies conference in the summer happily announced a respite from the stuck-record insanity of gov-

ernments espousing incarceration as panacea to all criminal behaviour, only to be told that there probably wasn't enough money to fund the necessary drug rehabilitation and counselling programmes that would ease prison overpopulation, has now suggested that prisoners should work 40 hours a week and be 'taxed' with some monies going to victims and some to the Revenue. The Prison Reforms Trust broadly welcomed this, and it is nice to hear sense from a politician of an autumn day, as seldom as one does. As summer gutters 'midst the fallen leaves, it is sense alone may see us through

