

DT012 - Tory leadership election 1990

Mr Cranley Onslow, chairman of the 1922 Committee, is reported as saying that it is very undesirable that there should be a leadership contest in the Conservative Party 'but we are stuck with the rules'. He is perhaps too close to the centre of things to assess correctly the mood of the electorate. My own reading is that it will damage the party if it shirks a genuine election at this point. Past evidence is that contested leadership elections do not harm the party's standing. What is harmful is the spectacle of senior politicians who understandably and properly have leadership ambitions being scared to make their bid. Sir Geoffrey Howe and Mr Michael Heseltine have both resigned from the Cabinet on genuine and important policy differences with Mrs Thatcher. Both have substantial claims to be considered for the leadership. It would be right for the parliamentary party to decide between these three admirable people now, as a preliminary to asking voters to return a Conservative Government in the next election. What is not wanted is another election with a 'stalking-horse' candidate like Sir Anthony Meyer. The public would see such a spurious contest as beneath the dignity of events. There are genuine issues at stake here, and the electorate demands that they be decided in a genuine contest.