

Mary Ann Sieghart

Duncan Smith must persuade voters that his party is not nasty, extreme, stuck in the Dark Ages and obsessed with Europe

The Tories are divided. We all know that. But the essential division in the party, a senior MP told me this week, "is between those of us who understand how bad it is and those who don't". "It", in this context, is the electoral pit that the Conservatives find themselves in.

On one side are MPs like Eric Forth, the flamboyant Shadow Leader of the House, who assumes that everything, like him, is fine and dandy, that voters will come flocking back to the Tories as soon as they fall out of love with Labour. On the other are those like Francis Maude, who knows that the Conservatives have to make themselves far more loveable before any such shift can occur.

In the middle are people like David Maclean (Chief Whip) and David Davis (party chairman), who have come to appreciate the need to modernise, as long as it doesn't go too far.

And that, roughly, is the position of Iain Duncan Smith. He knows that his party has to concentrate on public services, not Europe. He knows it has to show that it cares about the poor and vulnerable. He knows that it must stop being nasty and start being nice. He would like to change its composition, too, so that it better reflects the population.

Is that enough? It's certainly a start. But, as I talked to a group of centrist Conservatives last week — about 50 besuited men, three women perched at the back, everyone white, hardly anyone under 40 and many over 70 — I was reminded of just how far they still have to go.

The question is, how much does he really want change? Because change doesn't happen unless the leader and those around him are passionate about it. It's not enough to know that you ought to change, or even to say so: you have to want it at the core of your being.

Modernisation is difficult, painful, sometimes counterintuitive. It creates enemies out of people (and newspapers) who used to be friends. It is hard enough to achieve even when the leader is fiercely convinced of the need for it. If he is not, or if the people around him are not, they will always find it easier to give in to vested interests than to take them on.

So, for instance, Duncan Smith says he wants more women MPs. And rightly so: at the moment, he has just 14 out of 166. But is he prepared to take the laborious but necessary steps to achieve it? Sadly not. He won't countenance any form of positive discrimination, which in every Western democracy has proved the only way of overcoming the innate sexism



CHRIS HARRIS

Grasping the nettle: Iain Duncan Smith knows he must change the Tories' appeal to stand a chance at the next election. But does he have the head and heart to do so?

of selectors. Instead, his officials are "gently suggesting" to associations that they should consider women. The result? So far, 18 candidates have been picked, of whom only three are female.

Duncan Smith may console himself with the fact that those in his parliamentary party who don't want to modernise are not actively opposing him. They may grumble privately but they are not jumping up and down in fury. Had Michael Portillo won the leadership, the Tories would have looked far more divided.

On the other hand, a row between last-ditchers and modernisers would at least have alerted the public to what the party was up to. Neil Kinnock

and Tony Blair both realised that to have an argument with internal opponents and to win it was the best way to prove to voters that your party was changing. As it is, not many voters have noticed what IDS is doing.

And maybe that is because he is not doing enough of it. If he were really serious, he would by now have alienated members of his party. As it is, he has done little that makes them seriously reconsider what they are about.

Indeed, every now and then he slips back into the old-fashioned Tory prejudiced mould that lost the party the last election. His ranting *Daily Mail* article on asylum-seekers, his whipping of the party against

gay adoption, this week's hard-line stance on cannabis, all set back the cause.

When new Labour, in Opposition, was determined to prove that it was different, its discipline was unbreakable. You never caught Blair or Brown saying occasionally that anti-nuclear protesters had a point, or that secondary picketing might be a good idea, or that running up big deficits wasn't that bad for the economy. They knew that change required an iron will and immense patience. To get your message across, you have to say it again and again, without deviation, until both you and the journalists purveying it are utterly sick of it.

This is particularly true during the phase of telling the electorate what you are not, rather than what you are. New Labour had to persuade voters that it was not economically irresponsible, not soft on defence, not in the pocket of the trade unions.

Duncan Smith also has to persuade voters that his party is not nasty, not extreme, not stuck in the Dark Ages, not obsessed with Europe. They won't believe him unless a) he really means it, as Blair and Brown did, and b) he bangs on about it for years. Only then will it be safe for him to start telling voters what the party is, what policies it intends to adopt.

But do the Tories have the

patience to stick with him? Several senior Conservatives told me after the last election that they wouldn't make the same mistake twice. If the new leader, like William Hague, was still flatlining in the polls after two years, they would oust him rather than let him struggle on to lose the next election.

The good news for IDS is that the voting intention figures are creeping up. The bad news is that his support, as measured by MORI, has not yet exceeded 30 per cent, roughly the size of the Conservatives' core vote. He still has a very long way to go.

Most of what Duncan Smith has done so far is right, but it is not enough. If he wants both to survive as leader until the next election and to have a chance of winning it, he needs to bring much more determination to the task.

Bill Clinton's team put posters up in their war room to remind them that "It's the economy, stupid!". If IDS's lot really understood how bad it was, they would provoke themselves with a simple slogan: "It's us, stupid!"

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Pretty in pink? He must be hard as nails

David Beckham has sparked a craze among men to wear nail varnish. Woolworths staff have noticed a "large surge" since Becks wore pink at the christening of Liz Hurley's baby and silvery-black for a cover shoot in *GQ* magazine. He's a braver man than mine.

In fact, he's nearly a braver man than I. It was only two or three years ago that

I dared to start wearing nail varnish. It began on the toes, which have to be painted if you want to wear sandals to work in the summer. Then I gingerly started painting an almost transparent pale pink on my fingers. Finally I graduated to a marginally darker one.

Even now, I sometimes get the sensation, when I glance unawares at my

finger nails, that they must belong to someone else. For I had always believed that I wasn't grown-up enough to paint my nails.

But hell, if Becks can do it, so can I. If my ten and nine-year-old daughters are grown-up enough, I fear my excuse is thin to the point of invisibility. But silvery-black? Not till I'm at least 70.