**Chapter Fifteen**

**Who Governs? The General Election Defeats of 1974**

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The aim of this chapter is to consider the performance of the Conservative Party in the General Elections of 1974. Having secured 13,145,123 votes on a 46.4 percent vote share at the General Election of June 1970 (which provided them with 330 parliamentary seats), the Conservative Party would fall to 11,872,180 votes (a 37.9 percent vote share and 297 parliamentary seats) at the General Election of February 1974 (Butler and Pinto-Duschinsky, 1971; Butler and Kavanagh, 1974). A further erosion in the Conservative vote would occur at the General Election of October 1974, as they fell to 277 parliamentary seats on a 35.8 percent vote share and 10,464,817 votes (Butler and Kavanagh, 1975). In parliamentary terms, their respective electoral reversals were marginal – i.e. the Labour Party entered government as a minority administration in March 1974 and then with a majority of three after the October General Election. This reflected the fact that voters were displaying their scepticism towards the two main parties. The combined Conservative-Labour vote at the General Election of February 1974 was 75.1 percent as compared to their combined return of 89.5 percent at the General Election of June 1970, and Labour actually regained office on a lower vote share (37.9 percent) than they had secured in losing the General Election of 1970 (43.1 percent) (Butler and Pinto-Duschinsky, 1971; Butler and Kavanagh, 1974). The rise of the Liberals from 2,117,035 votes or 7.5 percent in June 1970, to 6,059,519 or 19.3 percent in February 1974 (see Lemieux, 1977; Alt *et al*., 1977), created a third party vote twice the size of any that been returned since the General Election of 1929 (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974: 15). It would act as a stimulus for the debates around the rise multi-party politics in Britain (Berrington, 1979).

The perception that the dynamics of party competition and parliamentary arithmetic was changing was felt within Conservatives circles from March 1974 onwards. For example, based on the evidence from national polling and their own internal polling, the Conservative Party chair, William Whitelaw, lamented that ‘the nation is in one of its coalition moods’ (CPA, LCC 1/3/2/110-113 ‘The Liberals’, 28 June 1974). That Whitelaw was discussing these issues within a shadowCabinet meeting in June 1974 was a source of frustration and anger for Conservatives. That is because the loss of office was not only unnecessary but it was also unexpected. It was unnecessary because having won the General Election of June 1970, there was no need to face the electorate until June 1975 (Sandbrook, 2010: 611-645). It was unexpected because despite the governing difficulties that the Conservatives had been experiencing over the previous three and half years in office, any doubts about their governing competence were not being translated into concrete support for the Labour opposition. As Ziegler observed ‘it was taken for granted by almost everyone that the Conservatives would win’ (Ziegler, 2010: 432). After all, within the three-week campaigning period – between the 7 and 28 February – a total of 26 opinion polls were conducted and the Conservatives held a lead in all but one of them, including one lead of nine percentage points. Of the final opinion polls, two gave them a two percentage-point lead; one gave them a three percentage-point lead; two gave them a four point-percentage lead and one gave them a one percentage point lead (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974: 95).

This chapter seeks to address the following dilemmas: first, how and why did the Conservatives decide to call and then lose the General Election of February 1974; and, second, how and why did they fail to regain office at the General Election of October 1974. By analysing these two dilemmas, we can highlight the mistakes that Heath made which would increase demands within the Conservative Party for a change in the party leadership on the basis that he was an electoral liability (Fisher, 1977: 147-173; Heppell, 2008: 51-53).

**The General Election of February 1974**

Heath had not wanted to call an early General Election. In his memoirs he would reflect that: ‘I always regarded the election as nothing better than a grim necessity’ (Heath, 1998: 512). The vast majority of Prime Ministers prefer to choose the date when they return to the country for a renewed mandate. This is because it gives them an advantage over their opposition parties in being able to pick a moment that is most fortuitous to producing an increased majority. Moreover, Prime Ministers as a general rule prefer not to call General Elections during the winter as the longer nights and colder climates may risk a) de-motivating activists who go canvassing and b) a reducing turnout of supporters. The Prime Minister of the day also risks all when they go to the country, especially prematurely.

Heath was made well aware of what those risks were. Earlier in the Parliament, Conservative Central Office and Research Department had given considerable thought to possible General Election dates prior to the necessary deadline of June 1975. Within their deliberations was the recommendation that a ‘snap’ General Election would not be advisable, and that one fought on a single issue could produce a ‘disturbing result’ as the ‘electorate or significant parts of it will not decide to vote about something else’ (CPA, SC/73/17, Memo by Michael Fraser, ‘Strategic Situation in 1973’, 14 February 1973). The demands of being in office had left them less well prepared than they had been for the General Election in terms of protecting their own marginals and in terms of targeting seats that they could gain (see for example, CPA, CCO, 20/8/16, ‘Letter from Michael Fraser to Edward Heath’, 26 May 1972). It is also worth recalling that in the aftermath of winning power, Conservative strategists had calculated that in order to regain power at the General Election in June 1975 they ‘needed unemployment under half a million and inflation under six percent’ (CPA, CCO 500/24/278, ‘Report on the 1970 General Election’, 17 July 1970). On both indicators, the Heath administration were clearly failing (as indicated in chapter five by James Silverwood, unemployment was around 946,000 and inflation was at 8.4 percent at the end of 1973), so there were clearly good reasons to remain in office and wait (hope) for these indicators to improve by June 1975 (for the economic policy record of the Conservatives under Heath, see Wade, 2013).

Given these concerns about holding an earlier than necessary General Election then, the obvious question is what happened to make Heath feel as if he had no other option than go to the electorate in February 1974?

Ultimately, the decision to hold an early General Election was a response to the breakdown in negotiations with the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) in the winter of 1973-1974 (on the Heath government and the Trade Unions see Seldon, 1988; Taylor, 1996). Having been left humiliated by the Miners’ Strike of early 1972, which was resolved after the Heath administration broke their own informal wage restraint policy (Phillips, 2006), the Cabinet was determined that they should not back down again – as Ball argues a ‘second surrender to the NUM was out of the question’ (Ball, 1996: 345). The NUM went on an overtime ban in November 1973 as a response to the pay award offered by the National Coal Board. With their action coinciding with the Yom Kippur War in the Middle East and the OPEC initiating increases in oil crisis, the Heath administration were not well positioned to withstand the impending energy crisis. Diminishing coal supplies and electricity power cuts led to the imposition of the three-day week (Dorey, 1995: 65-91).

Neither of the options for Heath looked that attractive politically. The first avenue out this national crisis, which was already undermining the perception of the government as being competent, was for Heath to do whatever was necessary to get the miners to end their action. Such a step might be deemed to be unacceptable amongst some on the Conservative backbenchers and it would create an image of governing weakness. The second avenue that Heath could pursue was to call a General Election and having secured a new (and potentially) larger parliamentary majority, argue that the second Heath administration had been granted a mandate to withstand the demands of the Miners thus compelling them to back down (Dorey, 1995: 65-91).

However, although Heath and the Cabinet reached what Kavanagh calls their ‘fatal decision’ in February 1974, rumours of a General Election, as a way out of the industrial relations impasse, had been circulating within the print media for weeks (see for example, Greig, 1974; Hatfield, 1974, Clark, 1974a). Rumours focused in on a possible General Election date of February 7, and for this to occur Heath and his Cabinet would have to make their decision to dissolve Parliament by January 17. If Heath and the Cabinet had made their decision before January 17, then they would have launched the General Election campaign against the miners’ overtime ban, but after that date had passed the NUM decided to call for a full strike (Kavanagh, 1996: 362-363).

Heath had been leading a Cabinet that remained unsure of which avenue to pursue (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974: 35). For example, Peter Walker (President of the Board of Trade 1972-1974) felt that the argument that the miners constituted a special case was bogus and had favoured an earlier General Election (Walker, 1991: 125). In contrast, the Employment Secretary, William Whitelaw, attempted to persuade his Cabinet colleagues that when placed within the context of the oil price rise, then the miners constituted a special case and, as such he was opposed to a General Election (Whitelaw, 1991: 123-132). Lord Carrington, Conservative Party Chair 1972-1974 would later reflect that Heath was correct in deciding to call a General Election, given the circumstances that he faced, but that he had delayed too long in reaching that decision (Carrington, 1988: 264-266). What made Heath delay his decision for so long? Was it a sign of weakness – i.e. was Heath ‘dithering’ because having considered the possibility of holding a General Election, he feared he might lose? (Ziegler, 2010: 423). Or was it a sign of arrogance – i.e. why rush into a General Election to solve the problem when given his abilities at negotiation and persuasion, Heath would be able to secure a compromise solution with the NUM – a position which Taylor describes as ‘self-confidence bordering on delusion’? (Taylor, 2005: 97).

In his memoirs Heath rationalised his decision on the following grounds. He recalled that the NUM had ‘decided to hold a ballot on an all-out strike’ and ‘asked union members whether they supported the line of the executive’ (Heath, 1998: 511). Heath regarded this as direct challenge to his political authority. Moreover, given ‘more than 80 per cent of those voting [wanted] a complete stoppage’ from 4 February he believed he had ‘no further room for manoeuvre’ in finding a negotiated settlement with them (Heath, 1998: 511). As a consequence, he concluded that ‘there was now only one possible course of action’ and that was to ask ‘the British people to raise “the truth and familiar voice of Britain – the voice of moderation and courage”’ (Heath, 1998: 511).

Heath delivered a Prime Ministerial broadcast to the nation to justify the need for holding a General Election: ‘do you want a strong Government which has clear authority for the future to take decisions which will be needed?’ (TNA: PRO, PREM 15/2128, ‘Text of Ministerial Broadcast’, 7 February 1974). By framing the question in this manner, Heath shifted the decision of how to govern onto the voters. Put simply, this strategy sought the support of the British people in his government and their broader economic strategy and he continued by asking ‘do you want Parliament and the elected Government to continue to fight strenuously against inflation?’ (TNA: PRO, PREM 15/2128, ‘Text of Ministerial Broadcast’, 7 February 1974). Here Heath was arguing that inflation was the key issue that needed to be addressed rather than the traditional fight against unemployment. Arguably this represented an emphasis upon fiscal responsibility from which Heath was seeking a new mandate. He then negatively posed the alternative, saying ‘or do you want them to abandon the struggle against rising prices under pressure from one particularly powerful group of workers?’ (TNA: PRO, PREM 15/2128, ‘Text of Ministerial Broadcast’, 7 February 1974). By legitimising an early General Election in this way, Heath was attempting to frame the problems facing Britain as a clash of ideas whilst presenting himself as the solution:

* ‘this time of strife has got to stop. Only you can stop it. It's time for you to speak—with your vote’;
* ‘it's time for you to say to the extremists, the militants, and the plain and simply misguided: we've had enough’;
* ‘it's time for your voice to be heard—the voice of the moderate and reasonable people of Britain: the voice of the majority’
* ‘there's a lot to be done. For heaven's sake, let's get on with it’

(TNA: PRO, PREM 15/2128, ‘Text of Ministerial Broadcast’, 7 February 1974).

The sense of this as a ‘crisis’ General Election (Sandbrook, 2010: 611) was also reflected in the title of the manifesto - *Firm Action for a Fair Britain* (Conservative Party, 1974a) *–* which appeared to promise a decisive response to the problems facing the country in the event the Conservatives were returned with a renewed majority. The central message of the manifesto was that the Labour Party had been assimilated by ‘a small group of power-hungry trade union leaders’ and that they had become ‘committed to a left-wing programme more dangerous and more extreme than ever before in its history’, and Labour were a ‘major national disaster’. These points sought to frame Labour as an even greater danger to the country than they had been historically, that their policies were ‘very vague and woolly’ (Sandbrook, 2010: 611). The political difficulties associated with the leftish-shift with the Labour Party in opposition – see chapter 13 – also motivated some Conservatives into thinking an early General Election could be advantageous. Indeed, Douglas Hurd argued in a paper to Heath that given the economy was unlikely to improve, it would be prudent to take advantage of Labour’s problems with an early General Election; especially as the Heath administration would likely face growing difficulties were it to continue. As such, ‘there is therefore, in our view, a strong argument for a change of approach’ in their strategic planning – i.e. despite their earlier doubts, seeking a new mandate might be the best way forward (Hurd, 1979: 120).

Seeking a renewed mandate against the back-drop of the so-called three-day week was not what they would have planned. The quadrupling of oil prices following the Yom Kippur war between Israel and oil producing states had, in turn, led to rising food prices, statutory prices and incomes policy, power shortages, and ultimately a wholesale re-evaluation of the so-called Keynesian consensus that had informed economic policy since the end of the Second World War (Sandbrook, 2010). Heath would reflect that the ‘oil crisis was a highly unwelcome disruption to our foreign policy’, but it was also the primary cause of the problematic domestic environment as it led the NUM to ‘put in a pay claim which would have meant increases of up to 50 per cent for some workers’ (Heath, 1998: 503). It is also worth noting that a further significant issue Heath faced during the campaign concerned the calls from the Confederation of British Industry, (CBI) for Heath to repeal the divisive Industrial Relations Act. This was because the Act had reframed the relationship between government, employers, and Unions to such an extent that it ‘sullied every relationship between employers and unions at national level’ (Clark, 1974b: 28). This made seeking negotiated improvements in working conditions problematic, thereby risking increases in strike action. Whilst Heath contended that this was simply the personal view of its Director-General, Campbell Anderson, it nevertheless impacted upon the Conservative Party campaign in a negative way given it enabled Labour to argue the intervention validated their view that the Act was problematic (for a detailed discussion on the failure of the Industrial Relations Act see Moran, 1977).

The difficulties for Heath in securing re-election were not confined to industrial unrest. Another problematic issue concerned membership of the European Community. The electoral offer of a referendum on continued membership that the Wilson Labour opposition was moving towards created an opportunity for Heath’s nemesis, Powell, to undermine his chances of re-election (Shepherd, 1996: 433-436). An implacable opponent of membership, aligned to his warnings over immigration and threats to British national identity, led Powell to ask voters whether the UK should ‘remain a democratic nation or whether it will become one province in a new Europe super-state’, from which Powell concluded that it was a ‘national duty’ for the voters to send a message to those who undermined Parliament’s ability to ‘make the laws and impose the taxes of the country’ (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974: 103). Instructing voters to endorse the Labour opposition, as they had created a route-map to exiting the European Community, meant that the influence of Powell upon the Heath era continued to the end (Sandbrook, 2010: 611; see chapter 12 for a detailed discussion on the Heath-Powell relationship). On Powell’s decision to not stand as Conservative candidate, Heath bemoaned the fact that ‘he did not even have the decency to warn the officers of his association or his agent in advance of his decision to abandon them’ (Heath, 1998: 512).

The cumulative impact of the difficult economic and industrial relations environment, compounded by the intervention of Powell on the European issue made it a problematic campaign for the Conservatives. The outcome of the voters to the ‘who governs’ presented to them by Heath was inconclusive. Needing 318 parliamentary seats for a majority in the 635 strong Parliament (the redrawing of the boundaries facilitated an increase from the 630 strong 1970 Parliament), the Conservatives were short on 297 (down from 330) and the Labour Party were up from 287 to 301[[1]](#footnote-1) (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974). It was an outcome that left Heath, as the incumbent Prime Minister with the ‘choice of either immediately conceding defeat, and thus tendering his resignation forthwith, or seeking a deal with one or more of the smaller parties’ and ‘Heath pursued the latter option’ (Dorey, 2009: 28).

Given the Conservatives had secured the most votes - 11, 872,180 to 11,645,616 – this appeared a legitimate strategy. In his discussions with the Liberal leader, Jeremy Thorpe, Heath rationalised why seeking an arrangement between the two parties could be justified. First, it was feasible, given that Wilson had made it clear that whilst the Labour Party *were* willing to form a minority administration (on 301 parliamentary seats they would be short by 17 of a majority) they *were not* willing to enter into any coalition or understanding with any other parties. As an alternative to that, a Con-Lib arrangement (297 Conservative parliamentary seats plus the 14 Liberal seats[[2]](#footnote-2)) would take them to 311 and with the seven Ulster Unionists likely to back the Conservatives, this could create an administration that could govern (TNA PRO PREM 15/2069, ‘Note for the Record’ [Heath meeting with Thorpe], 2 March 1974). Second, not only was it feasible but Heath argued that it was not only his ‘overriding duty’ to explore this option as it was in the ‘national interest’, but it was clear it would ‘represent the desires of the substantial number of voters to not have a socialist government’ (TNA PRO PREM 15/2069, ‘Note for the Record’ [Heath meeting with Thorpe], 2 March 1974). Third, it would be ‘possible’ for them to ‘construct a programme’ given that in ‘two major respects’ – i.e. membership of the European Community and inflation – ‘the policies of the two parties were *both alike* and both differed from those of the Labour Party’ (TNA PRO PREM 15/2069, ‘Note for the Record’ [Heath meeting with Thorpe], 2 March 1974). However, the ability of Heath to make an arrangement with Thorpe and the Liberals floundered on the issue of electoral reform and Heath’s failure to secure a means of remaining in power led to the Labour Party entering office as a minority administration (TNA PRO PREM 16/231 ‘Events leading to the resignation of Mr Heath’s Administration’ 16 March 1974).

It is worth noting that the Conservatives did not seem prepared for the possibility of having to engage in negotiations with the Liberals in order to remain in power. In mid-1973 their response to the improving electoral position of the Liberals was remarkably complacent, with this being dismissed as little more than ‘the mid-term expression of disappointment’ (CPA, SC 14/74/29-31, 26 July 1973). From polling eight percent in October 1972, the Liberals had doubled their projected vote to 17 percent by July 1973, with that increasing to 28 percent by August 1973 (King and Wybrow, 2001: 11). Despite their continuing progress, Chancellor Anthony Barber remained confident that they would be stalled and that ‘he didn’t believe they would hold the balance, or anything like that’ (Hetherington Papers, Meeting with Anthony Barber’, 15 November 1973). Throughout the whole of 1973, the Conservatives appeared to adhere to the view that the Liberals were a ‘paper tiger’ offering ‘quack remedies’ (CPA, CCO, CRD, 500/25/8 ‘Liberal Policy Brief’, 1 April 1973).

Despite these assumptions the Heath was moving, within 48 hours of the outcome of the General Election, towards attempting to form some form of coalition arrangement with the Liberals, which he felt was preferable to trying to operate as a minority administration. (CAB 128/53, Cabinet Conclusions, 1 March 1974, 5.45 pm). However, within both the Cabinet and his own parliamentary ranks there were real doubts about this course of action. Those doubts were not necessarily influenced by left-right categorisations. The Heathite sympathising Whitelaw later reflected that in the circumstances a ‘proposed coalition would have been regarded as wrong on principle by the British people’ (Whitelaw, 1991: 135), whilst Lord Carrington, who was at the time open minded to the ideas, later admitted that it would not have been ‘politically healthy or wise’ (Carrington, 1988: 267). From the backbenchers, the view of Kenneth Lewis was ‘just tell that man to stop messing about. We have lost an election, we cannot form a government, we have been defeated and we must go with dignity’ (Ziegler, 2010: 441). The issue of electoral reform was to be critical in the tentative negotiations that took place with the Liberals. Thatcher took the view that ‘horse trading’ like this was ‘making us look ridiculous’ and the electorate would view Heath as a ‘bad loser’ if he continued to engage in such manoeuvres[[3]](#footnote-3) (Thatcher, 1995: 239). Other cabinet sceptics included Maurice Macmillan and Keith Joseph, the later of whom claimed that Heath needed to step down on the grounds of ‘constitutional propriety’ in seeking to hold onto office (MS Hailsham, 1/1/8, Diary, 1 March 1974). With the Chief Whip, Humphrey Atkins, informing Heath and the Cabinet that the number of Conservative planning to oppose an arrangement with the Liberals that would involve a Speakers Conference on Electoral Reform, was around 50 plus[[4]](#footnote-4) (MS Hailsham, 1/1/8, Diary 2 and 3 March 1974), the Cabinet moved towards accepting that the longer term electoral costs to the Conservatives of electoral reform were more important the short-term gain on holding onto office (CAB 15/2069/16, Cabinet Conclusion, 4 March 1974). Fearful of the negative connotations of ‘hanging on’ and how this might make the Conservatives looked desperate and unprincipled, the decision to resign was reached (TNA: PRO PREM 16/231/6, ‘The Resignation of Mr. Heath’, 16 March 1974). That feat seemed justified given that Heath had been christened the ‘squatter in No 10 Downing Street’ (*The Spectator*, 1974).

**The General Election of October 1974**

Having called an unnecessary General Election and then having failed to win, the political authority of Heath was badly damaged. Cecil Parkinson recalled how Heath seemed ‘almost physically diminished’ by the impact of defeat and as a consequence ‘one just felt sorry for this desolate and lonely figure’ (Parkinson 1992: 48). McManus argues that Heath was disappointed in himself for his own mistakes – he argues that Heath ‘blamed himself for his failure to communicate effectively the necessary facts and arguments to the people, for his procrastination about calling the election, and for his failure to spare the nation’ (McManus, 2016: 153).

Despite this, Heath did not consider resigning the leadership of the Conservative Party, despite the fact that he had now led them into two electoral reversals out of three in a seven and half year period. He rationalised that losing 8.5 percent of the Conservative vote and 1,272,943 votes was not a resigning matter. He concluded that no other leading Conservative was better positioned than him to lead them into a General Election which, given the inconclusive outcome of the February contest, was likely to occur sooner rather than later (Ziegler, 2010: 443-469). What was more problematic was even though it may have been in the interests of the Conservative Party to have a new leader for that imminent General Election if he would resign, they had no means by which to remove him. The architects of the new democratic leadership election rules of 1965 had deliberately avoided a challenger provision or confidence procedure on the basis that they assumed that a failing party leader would voluntarily step aside (Fisher, 1977: 147-148). Ziegler provides an interesting interpretation of the interaction between the inevitability of a General Election shortly and the lack of a procedural mechanism for the Conservatives to utilise – he describes Heath being paradoxically both ‘weak’ and ‘impregnable’ (Ziegler, 2010: 448).

As he entered his second spell as Leader of the Opposition, it was also necessary for Heath to demonstrate that the Conservatives were a credible government in waiting. As such, Heath would recall in his memoirs that ‘as soon as the February election was over, we had started work on the policies which would feature in our next manifesto’ (Heath, 1998: 523). Yet Heath seemed incapable of acknowledging or addressing the fact that one of the biggest obstacles to the Conservatives regaining office was him – i.e. his image was tainted and given the memory of his premiership lingered as one of defeats, divisions, and a failed crisis election it was difficult for the Conservatives to repackage him as an emotionally intelligent leader who understood the concerns of voters. Conservative strategists had long understood that his inability to show empathy or emotions acted as a barrier between himself and the voters. His style of communication remained cool, detached and ridged when talking to voters through broadcast media. This had been a problem for the duration of his tenure as leader of the Conservative Party and strategists had long worried about his ‘stiff, odd, tense and humourless’ public persona’ (Campbell, 1993: 189; see also Ziegler, 2010: 184-188; 231-232; and for an illustration discussions on how to improve his public image during his first tenure as Leader of the Opposition, see CPA CCO 20/8/10, ‘How to Show Mr Heath as he really is’, 12 June 1967).

In the period between the February and October 1974 General Elections there was no evidence from the opinion polls of any improvement in the image of Heath. On the question of whether he ‘is or is not proving to be a good leader’ those that thought that he was went down – from 38 percent in April 1974 to 32 percent by October 1974 – and those that thought he was not went up – from 48 percent in April 1974 to 53 percent by October 1974. His second tenure as Leader of the Opposition began with a minus 10 for leadership satisfaction and by the time of the General Election of October 1974 his efforts had converted a minus 10 percentage score into a minus 21 percentage score (King and Wybrow, 2001: 207). These findings were replicated in terms of the projected vote: at the time of the General Election of February 1974 the Conservatives were on 39 percent to Labour on 37 percent; by June 1974 the Conservatives were down to 35 percent and Labour up to 44 percent; and by the time Wilson called the General Election of October 1974 the Conservatives were still trialling the Labour Party (by six percentage points), with the Conservatives on 36 percent and the Labour Party on 42 percent, (King and Wybrow, 2001: 11-12). It is also worth noting that the Conservatives were in retreat on the following question throughout 1974: ‘which party do you think can best handle the problems of the current economic situation?’ – at the time of General Election of February 1974, the Conservatives held a small lead over Labour (35 percent to 32 percent) but as they approached the General Election of October 1974, the Labour response had remained more or less stable (at 31 percent) whereas the Conservative had fallen seven percentage points, and with them on 28 percent they not trialled Labour by three percentage points (King and Wybrow, 2001: 58).

Throughout the period between March and October 1974 there was, therefore, little evidence to suggest that the Conservatives would be capable of winning a parliamentary majority – i.e. 318 seats – at the General Election (they would need to make 21 gains to do so). Given this evidence and the possibility of another hung Parliament, the Conservatives were considering other options to ensure they could gain access to power. The complacency that they had shown towards the Liberals in the last Parliament would have to be addressed. The importance that they would now attach to the Liberals is evident from the interventions of Ian Gilmour, who was shadow Secretary of State for Defence in the Heath shadow Cabinet. He emphasised to Heath shortly after losing office that ‘the need for good relations with the minor parties is unlikely to be confined to this Parliament’, before adding that ‘almost the only chance of our avoiding defeat in the summer would be to make a limited electoral pact with the Liberals’ (CPA, CCO, 20/2/7 ‘Ian Gilmour to Edward Heath’, 26 March 1974).

As Gilmour continued to use the print media as a means of mapping out the future options for the Conservatives, including that need to appeal to Liberals (Gilmour, 1974a, 1974b, 1974c), the complexities and risks associated with this were being identified. Backbencher Nigel Lawson was concerned to make sure that the Conservatives were clear on arrangements with the Liberals that would be beneficial and those that would be harmful. He informed Carrington, as Party Chair, that there were legitimate grounds for discussing some form of limited pact with the Liberals in 67 constituencies (CPA, CCO, 20/2/7 ‘Letter from Lawson to Carrington’, 24 May 1974). Lawson argued that this could lead to gains for the Conservatives totalling 31 seats and gains for the Liberals totalling 36 seats. He suggested that the short-term gain to the Liberals in terms of their parliamentary representation (enabling them to have potentially 50 seats) might act as a means of stalling the issue of electoral reform. Meanwhile the gains that the Conservatives would secure from the pact would provide them with a majority: i.e. if they hold all of their 297 current seats it would take them past the majority figure of 318 seats, whilst the 67 losses that the Labour Party would suffer would pull them back down to 234 seats. The longer-term value of this was clear to Lawson: ‘having used an electoral pact to gain an overall majority, we might then revoke the pact at the next election and annihilate the Liberals’ (CPA, CCO, 20/2/7 ‘Letter from Lawson to Carrington’, 24 May 1974).

Neither Carrington or Heath were convinced by the calculations that Lawson had constructed. They were of course built on the assumption that votes for parties would simply transfer across as a block, which was not a legitimate assumption to make[[5]](#footnote-5). Heath feared that the translation of votes on block would not work in a uniform way and as such, ‘there was a real danger of creating a Conservative minority government through *giving away* seats to the Liberals’ (CPA, SC 74/2-27, 1 April 1974). Carrington also worried about how an electoral pact could be presented to voters arguing that this is ‘too sophisticated for the public to understand’ (CPA, SC 74/4, 1 July 1974). How it would be viewed by Conservative activists was also a consideration, especially given the assumption that they would ‘still regard office as a prize they have no wish to share with others’ (Ramsden, 1996: 386).

However, given the evidence from the opinion polls throughout the summer of 1974, the Conservatives continued to fret about their ability to win an outright parliamentary majority (CPA, CCO, 180/34/2/9 ‘Third Post Election Survey: Summary and Analysis, 13 August 1974). As a consequence, Heath moved towards a strategy that tried to convince voters that national unity was more important than single party rule (Behrens, 1980: 27-28). If he was able to do this then he contended it might be possible for Heath to return to Number 10 as a unifying figure with the Conservatives as the largest player. Furthermore, the hostility that existed with the Labour ranks towards co-operation made Heath certain that it would be impossible for Wilson (and any alternative figure within the Labour Party) to lead them into either a coalition, or to lead up a Government of National Unity (CPA, SC, 74/2-27, 1 July 1974).

Ultimately, this ploy became a part of the manifesto, when Wilson decided (on September 18) to call a General Election, which was to be on October 10 (Pimlott, 1992: 643). The Conservative Party manifesto stated that:

it is our objective to win a clear majority, but we will use that majority above all to unite the nation, we will consult and confer with the leaders of other parties, we will invite people from outside the ranks of our own party to join us in overcoming Britain’s difficulties (Conservative Party, 1974b).

Heath defended this position in his memoirs, arguing that:

this was a difficult concept to put across, as cynics were bound to say that it was forced out of us by the expectation of defeat. It would have held good, however, whether we had formed a minority government or won a landslide victory (Heath, 1998: 524).

How viable was the idea of some form of national unity government? One problem was that there was voter scepticism about the sincerity of the offer by the Conservatives. Some voters felt that it might be a ‘trick’ – i.e. that the Conservatives were using the rhetoric of ‘national unity’ to actually secure partisan advantage (Butler and Kavanagh, 1975: 261). Wilson sought to stimulate those doubts being dismissing Heath’s plan as a recipe for ‘Con policies, Con leadership by a Con party for a Con trick’ (Pimlott, 1992: 646).

But the main problem was the idea of Heath as the Prime Minister of a national unity administration. How plausible was it for him to present himself as a candidate for consensus or unity in the General Election of October when he had presented himself as a candidate or conviction and confrontation in the ‘Who Governs’ General Election of February 1974 – a change in style and role may not fool voters (Wood, 1974). Press speculation developed which suggested that a government of national unity might be a viable option but that Heath might need to be sacrificed by the Conservatives to aid this prospect. Shortly before polling day, the *Guardian* reported that

Tory strategists say that Mr Edward Heath may be on the point of declaring unambiguously that if elected with a majority he will seek to form a coalition of parties to lead the country through the crisis. According to his aides Mr Heath would be prepared to stand down were his leadership to be the obstacle to the formation of a coalition (*Guardian*, 1974).

This suggestion illustrated the depth to which Heath’s leadership was being questioned (Garnett, 2012: 94-95). Irrespective of how well it was viewed within his own ranks, Heath continued to push this position – indeed his final message to Conservative activists before polling day was unambiguous as he argued ‘the real hope of the British people in *this situation* is that a National Coalition government, involving all the parties, should be formed’ (Heath, 1974).

Heath would be denied his opportunity as Wilson and the Labour Party were able win a small parliamentary majority of three. The outcome of the General Election of October 1974 left the Conservatives in an even worse position. Their vote share fell further from 37.9 to 35.8 percent and their return fell from 11,872,180 votes to 10,464,817 votes. In parliamentary terms, this resulted in a further 20 seats being lost (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974, 1975).

**Conclusion:**

In his study of the Conservative Party, Alan Clark described 1974 as the ‘year of blunder’ and the miscalculations that Heath had been made contributed to an increasing sense of indiscipline and discontent within the parliamentary ranks (see Clark, 1998: 435-452). What was worrying was that this increase was coming on the back of the 1970 to 1974 in which backbench rebellion rates had already increased significantly as compared to the Conservative administrations of 1951 to 1964, notably the 1951 to 1959 Parliaments (see Norton, 1978; see also Franklin *et al*., 1986). With the conflict between the one nation left and the economic liberal right escalating throughout the Heath era, we can argue that his inability to manage that divide effectively represented a failure of party management. Coming as it did on the back of the governing failures of 1970 to 1974, this explains why his reputation was to be so sullied amongst Conservatives as well as voters (Fry, 2005: 211; on how Heath mismanaged his powers of appointment as a tool of party management, see Heppell and Hill, 2015).

It was the response of Heath to their second electoral defeat inside eight months that irritated his eventual successor the most (Ziegler, 2010: 470-473). As Heath mapped out how the Conservative campaign had worked well as a containment exercise, Thatcher concluded that Heath ‘was too defensive of his own past record to see that a fundamental change of policies was needed’, and that ‘everyone except Ted knew that the main problem was the fact that he was still leader’ (Thatcher 1995: 261, 263).

However, despite holding the leadership of the Conservative Party for nearly a decade, and having lost three elections out of four inside eight years, Heath was simply unwilling to resign. And yet there had been a desire to remove Heath from the leadership of the Conservative Party amongst some backbenchers that pre-dated their removal from office at the General Election of February 1974. Back in December 1972, one backbencher John Wells, wrote to Heath’s parliamentary private secretary (PPS), Tim Kitson, and said that Heath is: ‘no doubt completely indifferent to what I think and he is unlikely to mend his ways. All I can do is to play as active a part as I can in any moves to get rid of him’ (Heath Papers, 3 1/17, ‘Letter from John Wells to Tim Kitson’, 30 December 1972). A similar warning came from another Conservative parliamentarian, David Mudd, who wrote to Heath in September 1973 saying that there was a group of 20 plus Conservative backbenchers who planned to make ‘moves for a change of leadership’ (Heath Papers, 3 1/17, ‘Letter from David Mudd to Edward Heath’, 25 September 1973). Given that there was no provision for a challenge to Heath under the existing leadership election rules that the Conservative Party were utilising, these letters acted as a warning that pressure might be mounting for a rethink on those rules. The desire for change was to increase once Heath had led the Conservatives into the unnecessary General Election of February 1974. In opposition, Heath was unmoved by the warnings about his leadership from Francis Pym (his former Chief Whip in office and now a member of his shadow Cabinet). Pym wrote to him speaking of the ‘crisis of confidence’ that existed within the parliamentary Conservative Party, adding that: ‘I have indicated my anxieties about the way the party is being run ... I know from what others have said that I am not alone in this view’ (Heath Papers, 3 1/9, ‘Letter to Edward Heath’, 11 June 1974). In the aftermath of the General Election of 1974, with the Conservative Party procedurally incapable of removing, he was advised by many friends to resign. For example, Kenneth Baker, his parliamentary private secretary, warned him:

you had better resign now as leader if you don’t want to be hurt, there are many people in the party who are out to destroy you – the malicious, the malcontents, the sacked, the ignored and overlooked, are all blaming you (Baker 1993: 43-44).

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1. King felt that ‘the Conservatives not only lost the February 1974 election but suffered one of the most dramatic reversals in British electoral history’ (King, 1985: 99) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Liberal vote was up from 2,117,035 votes or 7.5 percent from June 1970 to 6,059,519 or 19.3 percent (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bogdanor argued that it ‘was at this point that her hostility to Heath as a traitor to Conservatism crystallised’, as Heath was ‘prepared to sacrifice any chance of the Conservatives ever again achieving an overall majority on their own for the mere temporary renewal of power’ (Bogdanor 1996: 373). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Prior recalls that had Heath attempted to pursue this further the Conservative Party would have ‘split’ (Prior, 1986: 95). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An example of this would be the seat of Lewisham West. The Conservatives had lost this seat at the General Election of February 1974 with 18,716 votes compared to Labour’s 21,118 votes. The Liberals had come third on 7,974 votes. The electoral pact suggested would assume that if the Liberals did not stand then enough of the freed up Liberal vote would transfer across to the Conservatives for them to regain the constituency (i.e. the combined Conservative and Liberal vote would take them to 26,690 votes). However, if the Liberal vote fragmented with 60 percent of them breaking for the Conservatives (i.e. 4,784) and 40 percent of them for Labour (i.e. 3,189) then the pact would fail, with Labour winning the constituency with 24,307 votes to the Conservatives on 23,500 votes. In the General Election of October 1974 both the Liberal and Conservatives stood and both saw their vote shrink – the Conservatives down to 15,573 from 18,716 votes and the Liberals down to 5,952 from 7,974 votes, whilst the Labour vote was stable, down from 21,118 to 21,102 (Butler and Kavanagh, 1974, 1975). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)