

William Hague: Speech to Conservative Spring Forum

Speaking at the Conservative Party spring Forum in Gateshead today, William Hague will say:

(Check against delivery)

Opening of session

“I have always been proud to have been born, raised and educated in the north of England. I’ve always counted it as an advantage in life. And when anyone has ever argued to me that Yorkshire should have its own assembly or government, I have always replied that the role of Yorkshiremen is not just to run Yorkshire but to help run the world.

In the 1970s, my mother, who was for many years the Treasurer of the local RNLI, went in to a pub in Barnsley collecting for the lifeboats, and came face-to-face with Arthur Scargill, then at the height of his influence. “Don’t worry, love,” he said to her, “when my Labour mates and I come to power you won’t have to collect money any more because we’ll have the lifeboats nationalised.” “Yes,” said my mother, “and then they’ll no doubt be on strike – so get your hand in your pocket and get your money in that lifeboat”.

There is a directness about us northerners, and a refusal to be taken for granted. There is a readiness to answer back.

And for us northern Conservatives it is time to answer back.

I have for years been determined that the Conservative Party will not be a party of the South and the Midlands but will be a party of the whole of England and the whole United Kingdom.

We have often been told by out-of-date commentators that, yes, of course, the Tories can win in southern England, but you know, they can make no progress in the north.

I want them to hear today these three facts:

- In last year’s local elections many of our most striking victories, in Blackpool, in South Ribble, in the East Riding of Yorkshire and in Chester were here in the North of England.

- In those elections the Conservatives fielded more candidates in the North than any other party
- And in Yorkshire and the North West the Conservatives now control more councils than any other party.

Oh, and by the way, in a council by-election in Middlesbrough on Thursday the Conservative share of the vote went up 14%

I want them to know that in dozens of council wards across the north the work to build up our strength at local level has long been going on.

I want them to know that whatever weaknesses we may have had in our organisation and parliamentary seats in the north we have resolved, with great dedication and determination, to put it right.

That since we launched Campaign North last year we have built up our Campaign Centres in Newcastle, Salford and Bradford, raised more money than for many years on the basis that it is spent here in the north, and that has allowed us to double the number of our campaigning staff in just one year.

That we have here some of the best councillors and candidates in the land. In case anyone doesn't believe me among those commentators, who can be a little cynical at times, I am going to show you what we are doing and some of the people doing it.

In a moment we will see the first of three short films, about the excellent work of our Salford Campaign Centre, serving all of the North West. And we are going to hear from some of the hard working candidates and councillors who are working to transform our position in the north.

Cllr Lee Martin of Sunderland, Cllr Mike Walker of Wakefield, Cllr Faraz Bhatti of Manchester, and our candidates Wendy Morton of Tynemouth, Anne-Marie Trevelyan of Berwick-on-Tweed, Zahid Iqbal of Bradford West and Nigel Adams of Selby – please give them all a great welcome.

They are the future of our party. They are the future of the North. They are worth listening to, and I am proud to stand alongside them as we rebuild our party across the north. Thank you very much.”

Speech at end of session

“Well there you see it. We don't just have the most candidates and councillors, we have the best candidates and councillors.

With their work, and your support, the days of Labour being able to take the north for granted in a general election will soon be gone.

Running through what they have said is what should be the motive of public life, the determination to serve and help the people they represent.

They are showing in each town and city how Conservatives can do the best job for their communities. But I believe we can do even more than that: we can do a better job than Labour for the North of England as a whole. Today I can announce that we are establishing a special policy commission to inform the work of the next Conservative Government, with the task of reviewing the transport needs and links of the north of England and making recommendations on the priorities for the future. When it comes to the needs of our northern regions, we are going to be not only highly organised as a party, but highly prepared to deliver as a Government.

That work will supplement the tireless efforts of our candidates and councillors, for I believe that today we can say with certainty, as we rededicate ourselves to all our efforts across the north, that at the next general election the people of the north will find their strongest advocates here in the Conservative Party.

And I believe too, more strongly with every month that passes, that our northern revival will be part of the great national triumph of our party.

I have been very busy these last two months on the floor of the House of Commons, calling for trust, honesty and integrity in politics, for of all the major political parties, the only party that has been true to its promise to vote for a referendum on the European treaty has been the Conservative Party.

The Prime Minister who did not have the courage to call the election he had planned is the same Prime Minister who does not have the honour to call the referendum that he promised.

The only thing he has been able to decide upon is to run away from ever consulting the people.

There they were when we met at Blackpool last October, talking of nothing but an imminent election with the arrogant over-confidence that comes from too long in power. Neil Kinnock was even there to say that an election would be called and the Tories would be 'ground in to the dust'. A triumphalist Kinnock - a sure sign that everything was about to come to grief.

For it turned out within hours that the Prime Minister who had calculated on an

early election before he was found out had been rumbled already; that the leader who had prepared for the battle did not have the bottle to begin it; and it has since turned out that he is the same leader who agrees a European Treaty but can't decide whether to attend the ceremony, calls a minister incompetent but couldn't decide whether to sack him, calls a review of round the clock drinking but then can't decide to go ahead and put a stop to it as he should; this is the Prime Ditherer of the nation.

He reminds me of the American state Governor who once said 'I'm not indecisive. Or am I?'

Perhaps this is no surprise, but for me the truly astounding fact we have discovered in recent months is that a Cabinet without John Prescott and Margaret Beckett is less competent than the Cabinet when they were in it.

Not only have they lost the bank account details of every family in the country and let out thousands of criminals early because they failed to plan for prison places, but we have a Home Secretary who is scared to walk down the street and a Chancellor who appeared to have dreamt he was delivering the budget and then woke up to find that he was.

Gordon Brown has taken away in tax more of the income of hard-pressed families than ever before in peacetime. And after eleven years of that where does our country stand. Is our transport system the envy of the world, or our schools and hospitals the best they could be?

The truth about this Government's time in office is that after eleven years of false announcements, re-announcements and non-announcements, after more than a decade of cynical half-truths and spin, we have a country judged to be the worst developed nation on earth for children to grow up in, where places at good schools have to be allocated by lottery, and where the finest pension system in the world has been taxed into ruins.

In terms of the long-term, insidious, month-by-month damage this Government is doing to our country I have no hesitation in saying that it is the worst government of modern times.

And so we are determined to replace it. That is why you are here; it is why I came back to the frontbench: we have slogged away for year after year but there will come the moment when we replace this government with one this great country deserves, and when that happens we are going to be there.

Now we are making sure that we are ready for government. We have strength at the top. Last September, when the pundits and Labour had us written off, David Cameron turned out to be, in private as well as public, cool, clear and good-

humoured under pressure and under fire. And I believe that the way he led the remarkable turnaround of our fortunes in just one week could not have been bettered by anyone alive.

And when I look around the Shadow Cabinet table I am proud to belong to a formidable team. Every time George Osborne makes a policy announcement Treasury ministers go into a flat panic to see if they can imitate it. David Davis eats Home Secretaries, and then goes on to have his breakfast. Liam Fox knows and cares more about the welfare of our armed forces and their families than any Labour minister has ever bothered to find out in the first place.

Now it is we who set the pace, whose policies, on inheritance tax, on prison reform, on welfare reform, are setting the agenda of British politics, showing all the time that we are preparing to govern in a way that delivers real change.

In foreign policy too we want real actions instead of grand words. On Wednesday, David Cameron was challenging Gordon Brown to match his pronouncements on Darfur with new international initiatives to help deal with this desperate tragedy; on Iran it is we have proposed the way forward to prevent a nuclear arms race in the Middle East; and on Iraq, as we approach the fifth anniversary of the war, we will be renewing in parliament our call for the full scale privy council inquiry into the origins and conduct of the war - something ministers have sought to avoid but which is vital if we are to learn for the future.

Wherever I go as Shadow Foreign Secretary I am emboldened and heartened by one thing above all: that wherever in the world you see better schools, finer healthcare or lower crime rates it is Conservative ideas that have brought it about. And today I am emboldened too to believe that the chances of that happening in Britain are growing by the month. For far from the team at the Shadow Cabinet table, there is, as we have seen this morning, another team that is at least as impressive in its quiet determination to change our country. Every time Lee Martin knocks on a door in Sunderland, every time Mike Walker solves a local problem in Wakefield, every time Zahid Iqbal wins a convert in Bradford, the Conservative team is marching on with a spirit and a strength even here in the north of England not witnessed for many years.

Gordon Brown has run from a general election. But within two years there will be nowhere left for him to hide. And as the weeks go by to what will be that fateful election, Conservatives across the nation can be assured that we in the north will do our bit, and perhaps more than our bit, to answer the call of the millions of our fellow citizens who know it is time for change.”