

The Tories still seem more Flashman than Gladstone

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These quirks of body language matter. They are why it's still worth coming to party conferences. As the economic crisis continues to rage, Tory faces are poker-serious. Cameron goes on about the contract with voters not yet being sealed. They are scared of premature swaggering, that Kinnock air-punching moment. But never mind what they say. Look at the walk. The polls may have narrowed a bit, but the Tories are quite sure they are marching back to power.

That being so, the Conservatives' big challenge is whether they sound like a caustic opposition, or like a responsible government-in-waiting. David Cameron knows it. He had his most serious face on yesterday, a non-flashy tie and repeatedly used the word "responsible".

He and George Osborne plaintively ask why Brown and Alistair Darling don't invite them for joint talks, as the Republicans invited the Democrats. Well, even as the banking story unfolded in London, everyone was playing politics. Labour has no need to bring in the Tories because the Tories don't control "Congress". Why would Brown want to give any kind of unnecessary platform to Cameron, given the vile personal abuse Cameron showers him with?

The danger for the Conservatives, which they seem unable to avoid, is that they make good rhetorical points without actual substance. William Hague, Osborne and Cameron all addressed the party faithful yesterday, and there were plenty of good soundbites, such as Cameron's "Gordon, you have had your boom and your reputation is now bust". But the cocky Tory leadership has to show it is capable of more than rhetoric.

It may sound smart to be against both a taxpayer-financed rescue of failing banks and against letting them fail. Whatever the government does, you can then criticise them: either for loading more bills on hard-pressed taxpayers, or for being irresponsible with the system. But what is the Osborne solution? Apart from dwelling on the "we wouldn't begin here" point, Osborne airily suggests that the Bank of England should be in charge of "restructuring" Bradford and Bingley. This has left Treasury officials, working round the clock this weekend to find a rescue plan, baffled.

At present, the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Financial Services Authority are all working to restructure B&B. What Osborne's idea of letting the Bank of England take total control seems to mean is going into administration by another name. He claims the creditors would feel the pain, rather than the British taxpayer - but why would they? No, in the words of one Treasury man this weekend, the Tory plan is "utterly reckless", risking a loss of confidence that could endanger the whole banking system.

Or take their other big idea, putting some kind of control over public spending in the hands of yet another quango, the Office for Budget Responsibility. It's a bad idea in principle. If governments don't control public spending or borrowing, they are barely governments. This is supposed to be a party that believes in restoring the authority of the Commons, and of cabinet government, not handing it away to unelected officials. Tory MPs I've talked to privately ridiculed it as a vacuous Blairite soundbite. Something's difficult? Now in politics, you try to hand it over to somebody else.

Yet this is another policy that doesn't mean what it says. For the proposed new body wouldn't actually have any powers to compel the Treasury to do anything. It would simply report. Sure, if it reported that a Tory government was borrowing too much and spending too much that would be mildly shaming. But not much more so than Tory columnists or Commons select committees or respected bankers saying the same. It's shallow oppositionist politics of the thinnest kind.

The truth is that the economic crisis has stripped away almost everything positive, optimistic and distinctive the Conservatives had to say. Cameron has simply ditched his green agenda. On green taxes, persuading people to turn

from cars and cheap air travel and even on issues like airport expansion and nuclear power, they have gone silent.

What about tax cuts? The Conservatives know they are more likely in the short term to have to raise taxes. If not, they will have to slash public spending. Yet not only are they committed for the next few years to matching Labour, they are still making spending commitments. Those 3,000-plus new state schools won't be cheap. The expansion of the armed forces won't, nor the new prisons. It isn't their fault that they are trapped. But trapped they are.

Let's not forget the "broken society". I don't see how giving a slight tax advantage to married couples is going to stop knife crime, or reduce the amount of litter and graffiti around, as Cameron seems to suggest. Slogans are easy, but the detail remains scant.

None of this may make much difference at the next general election. If the country is fed up with New Labour and has failed to warm to Gordon Brown, then voters will swing to Cameron, however thin his agenda. The economic crisis may help him. It gets him off some contentious thinking on green issues.

Yet even without difficult decisions to be made, Cameron has to explain what the new Tories stand for. Do they have distinctive, properly thought out policies? Or are they content to kick a deeply unpopular government in hard times? So far, they still seem more Flashman than Gladstone.

You could sum up the policies: don't do much on the banking crisis, have a divisive referendum on Europe, plunge the schooling system into an expensive flurry of organisational change and promise to cut taxes for the well-off, but only some time in the future. Oh yes, and restore weekly rubbish collections. Many voters will barely notice, and Labour is too busy disembowelling itself to make these points; but it hardly looks like a shrewd plan for power.

I could be wrong. Maybe there is a clear and detailed agenda waiting to be unveiled, something more than heckling and soundbites. It's just that so far, there's not much sign of it.

Jackie Ashley is a Guardian columnist and political interviewer