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HEADLINE: Tories' best hope of victory is that the pollsters have got it wrong

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BODY:

As Tony Blair heads into the election, the polls conducted over the weekend all suggest that Labour's lead over the Conservatives has shrunk. Mori reports that the lead has even reversed among those reporting that they are most likely to vote.

But in spite of these figures, the safest bet remains upon the return of a third successive Labour government.

Michael Howard may have captured the headlines by focusing on issues such as immigration and crime. But despite the last few opinion polls, trends in surveys conducted this spring suggest the Conservatives remain stuck. There have been occasional false dawns, but the party appears to have made no consistent progress in gaining support since its spectacular fall from grace over the Exchange Rate Mechanism debacle in the early 1990s.

The more than two dozen national polls published this year give the Conservatives on average about a third of the vote, exactly where they were in the 2001 general election, and a meagre two points up on their 1997 performance. Since the 2001 general election, out of 190 polls, only 19 - most of them by YouGov - have reported a Conservative lead.

Different companies generate slightly different vote estimates, influenced by the methods used when weighting for likelihood of voting, sampling practices and whether the fieldwork is conducted by telephone or through the internet. And almost all the results reporting a modest Conservative lead were during the conventional period for the mid-term blues, from which the government has subsequently recovered.

By contrast, the average of the spring polls this year puts the Labour vote at 38 per cent, down four points on the 2001 general election, and down just six points from its dramatic 1997 landslide. If this level of support were maintained on polling day, a uniform national swing would produce a Labour majority of about 132.

The main beneficiaries from the modest erosion in Labour support are the Liberal Democrats, with about 20 per cent of the vote.

If the polls are indeed correct, Labour's return for a third term seems assured. And if so, we may expect a long ho-hum campaign, despite all the talk about popular mistrust of Mr Blair, speculation about an Iraq backlash, endless headlines about splits in the Labour leadership and deep public scepticism, as Mori polls report, about service delivery.

But let us assume for the moment, as Conservative Central Office prays, that the spring opinion polls are not correct. There are many reasons why they may have systematically under-estimated Conservative support.

Surveys usually have the greatest difficulty in estimating the proportion of non-voters. If there is differential turnout, the Labour vote will probably sink most, as in the last general election, although often in their safest seats where it does least damage to the government's majority.

The latest Mori poll for the Financial Times gives the Conservatives a lead among those most likely to vote.

The Liberal Democrats may hope to benefit from any tactical voting or general disaffection with the government, letting them shave away Labour seats where they are well-placed, such as in Cardiff Central, Dunbartonshire East or Bristol West.

Mr Howard's sotto voce populism may strike a chord among certain Labour voters who will not admit to voting Conservative on the basis of race and immigration; Mori polls report that concern about these issues has risen this spring, even overtaking education as one of the three most important problems facing the country.

Conservative Central Office may also pin its hopes on the unexpected - a big Labour campaign gaffe, a sudden international crisis, a dramatically poor set of economic indicators - which may upset even the best laid plans.

And remember that even before any ballots are cast, Labour has already lost 10 seats in the new parliament, due to the boundary revisions north of the border.

Let us, therefore, imagine that Labour's lead melts away on polling day so that the two leading parties are level in the popular vote. Yet even this rosy scenario for the Conservatives will not be enough. Not even close. Because the Conservatives face an electoral mountain before they can hope to regain Number 10.

The accompanying table highlights the challenge. Remember that Labour had a 165-seat majority in June 2001, which falls to a notional 158 under the new Scottish boundaries. If the Conservatives and Labour had exactly the same share of the vote at 37 per cent, Mr Blair would retain a comfortable 74-seat overall parliamentary majority.

Indeed, Labour would still remain the largest party, although losing its majority over all other parties, if there were a uniform national swing of 6.3 per cent against it.

It would take a huge swing of more than 10 per cent, with the Conservatives at about 42 per cent to Labour's 30 per cent of the vote, for the Conservatives to form the next government. Even then, they would only have an overall parliamentary majority of two.

The conclusion? Any aspiring Conservative parliamentary candidates have to be in the game for the long haul, as it will probably take two successive elections, at least, for their party to have a reasonable shot at Number 10.

To stand a realistic chance of government, the Conservatives would benefit from new blood on the backbenches and in the leadership team, a fresh vision of where they will lead Britain, and an economic downturn under Labour. All the signs suggest that the election will probably not see a change of government. But the intriguing prospects for a change of leadership in the aftermath, perhaps in both big parties, remains on the cards.

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