

opinion

The future's bleak if Tory Party becomes a narrow sect

Last week I wrote about the retirement from the Commons of long-serving Lib-Dem MP Norman Lamb. Retirement resignations are a bit like red buses.

You write about one and inevitably another one is following on right behind.

On Tuesday the Conservative MP for Broadland, Keith Simpson, announced that he too would be quitting at the next election, whenever it comes.

He's served in the Commons for 22 years and is one of Parliament's real characters. He's also one of my two best friends in politics – David Davis being the other – so forgive me if what I am about to write isn't exactly very impartial.

Until July, Keith had never rebelled against his party whip. He has loyally served his party but to little reward. He held a series of shadow ministerial posts in opposition but neither David Cameron nor Theresa May saw fit to make him a minister.

Given some of the non-entities that did achieve ministerial posts, I've always found this inexplicable. He is a military expert with huge experience and would have made a very fine defence or Foreign Office minister, but it wasn't to be. Instead he has served as a senior member of the Security & Intelligence Committee.

So why has he quit? Quite simple. He's fallen out of love with politics and Parliament. He is fed up with the state of Brexit and thinks his party has gone stark raving mad.

He's totally against a "no deal" Brexit and the tipping point for

Iain Dale



him, I suspect, was the election of Boris Johnson as leader of the Conservative Party. Keith is, shall we say, not a fan.

Keith is not alone on the Conservative benches in announcing he's off. A large number of senior MPs has done the same, and on Tuesday night the 21 Conservative rebels were expelled from the Conservative Party for defying an effective "confidence vote" on a three-line whip.

There was precedent for this because John Major did the same thing in 1992 over the Maastricht Treaty. He turned a vote on the Maastricht Bill into a confidence vote and expelled a dozen MPs, who became known as the "whipless wonders".

The only difference was that a general election wasn't in the offing, and they were all allowed back into the fold after a suitable period of time had elapsed.

The other difference is that most of them were relatively unknown mavericks, whereas the 21 who have been summarily thrown out this week include two former chancellors (Philip Hammond and Ken Clarke), former cabinet ministers like David Gauke and Greg Clark, and Winston Churchill's grandson, Sir Nicholas Soames.

Successful political parties are broad churches – big-tent coalitions, if you like. Narrow sects do not win elections. The



Keith Simpson winning the Broadland seat in 2015. The Conservative MP will be quitting at the next election. He would have made a very fine defence or Foreign Office minister, says Iain Dale
Picture: ANTONY KELLY

Conservative Party has to be a party which can include the likes of Ken Clarke as well as Jacob Rees-Mogg. It must welcome One Nation Conservatives like Keith Simpson, as well as the more ideological John Redwood. If it doesn't, I fear for its future.

Look at what happened on a local level if you want to see the dire consequences for a political party that is perceived as divided and split.

After years of it being run by the Lib-Dems, the Conservatives

won back control of North Norfolk District Council several years ago. But, very soon, splits in the Tory group occurred. There were personality clashes as well as bitter disagreements over policy. Councillors were expelled from the group. Others resigned to go independent.

The result? Inevitably, the Lib-Dems are now back in control with a whopping majority. Let that be a warning.

Broadland Conservatives will now face the prospect of choosing

a new candidate.

When I moved back to Norfolk and bought a house in Keith's constituency, a journalist wrote that my prime motive for doing so was so I could succeed Keith. I killed off that particular canard by pledging to give £10,000 to a charity of Keith's choice if I ever applied to be a candidate in Broadland.

Suffice to say that I haven't got a spare £10k in my bank account!

iain@iaindale.com @iaindale