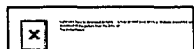


RELEASE IN PART
B6

From: sbwhoep [redacted]
Sent: Friday, March 5, 2010 9:52 AM
To: H
Subject: H: More trouble for Tories and Cameron. He needs to support NI peace, not another problem. Sid

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March 5, 2010

New blow for Tories as lead slips in marginals

By Nigel Morris and Michael Savage

Poll shows crumbling support in target seats as David Cameron is drawn into Ashcroft non-dom row

The Conservative lead is crumbling in the crucial marginal seats that David Cameron is relying on to deliver general election victory for the party, a poll last night disclosed.

The result was a fresh setback for the Tory leader after a torrid day in which he was drawn deeper into the row over the billionaire peer Lord Ashcroft, when it emerged that he had known for less than a month that Lord Ashcroft had maintained his non-dom tax status for 10 years.

The chances of the party drawing a line under the controversy were also wrecked by the announcement that Lord Ashcroft will be summoned to the Commons to explain why he negotiated a secret deal to enter the House of Lords without paying tax in this country on his overseas fortune.

With Gordon Brown expected to announce the election date this month, senior Tories have put a brave face on their sliding support in national opinion polls since the turn of the year.

They insisted they were performing much more strongly in marginal constituencies where the drive for votes has been masterminded and substantially funded by Lord Ashcroft.

The YouGov poll for Channel 4 News found the Tory lead in 60 Labour-held marginals had shrunk from seven to just two points over the past year.

The slide in Conservative support is further evidence Britain could be heading for a hung parliament after the election expected on 6 May. The survey put the Tories on 39 per cent (down four points since last year) and Labour on 37 per cent (up one). YouGov calculated that the results would leave the Tories the largest party after the election, but 11 seats short of an overall Commons majority.

An investigation by *The Independent* last week found the Tories spent £6m over two years in the marginal battlegrounds, in most cases far outspending Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

The party faces the daunting challenge of capturing 117 seats to achieve a majority of just one - a task described by a shadow cabinet member as a "mountain to climb".

The Conservatives received some good news yesterday when an 18-month inquiry by the Electoral Commission concluded that the £5.1m they received in donations from Bearwood Corporate Services, controlled by Lord Ashcroft, were legal. The party would have faced having to pay the money back had the electoral watchdog reached the opposite conclusion.

However, the commission added its regret that the Tories refused to agree to interviews and that Lord Ashcroft had destroyed documents relating to the ownership of the company.