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Cameron boosts party members by 16,000

By **Toby Helm**

(Filed: 06/01/2006)

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The election of David Cameron as Tory leader has led to a remarkable surge in party membership, figures obtained by The Daily Telegraph show.

In the first month since he was chosen as Michael Howard's successor, 16,000 people have joined, giving the Conservatives comfortably more members than Labour and the Liberal Democrats put together.



Oliver Letwin, flanked by David Willetts and Lady Perry

The leap is believed to be one of the biggest in any single month on record and was particularly striking as it occurred over the normally quiet Christmas and New Year period.

Conservative Party membership now stands at around 290,000. Labour's has slumped from more than 400,000 at the peak of Tony Blair's appeal to under 200,000 while the Liberal Democrats have around 70,000 members.

Mr Cameron said the rise showed that people were responding to "our message of change, optimism and hope".

He added: "Above all, we are showing how the consistent application of our values - trusting people and sharing responsibility - can inspire a new generation to get involved in politics and to help build a modern, compassionate Conservative Party."

The Tories say that support among students has also increased dramatically.

An opinion poll by the Opinionpanel Student Panel last week showed a seven per cent rise in support for the Tories among students and an eight per cent fall in backing for the Liberal Democrats among the same group.

Yesterday Mr Cameron tried to maintain the momentum of change and further broaden the party's appeal by stressing that the Tories had to become "the party of public service improvement".

At the same time, the party launched a new group that included the former shadow chancellor, Oliver Letwin, to develop policies on the key election battlegrounds of health, education and other public services.

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Following from his decision to tear up previous Tory health policies and re-position the party as one dedicated to improving the NHS, Mr Cameron said he was determined to improve all public services "for everyone".

David Willetts, the shadow education secretary, said at the group's launch that raising standards in public services should involve ending the "war" between government and public servants.

Lady Perry, a former chief inspector of schools, who chaired the group, said that people were weary of endless structural reform of public services and tired of attacks on dedicated professionals.

"Over recent years we have demoralised our professionals with this emphasis on bad teachers, bad schools, bad doctors," she said.

"In any organisation there are going to be some people who are not pulling their weight or are not up to it.

"But that is a management issue; it is not an issue for central government."

- David Miliband is being steadily backed to succeed Tony Blair as prime minister, the bookmakers Ladbrokes says.

The local government minister started at 12/1 to replace Mr Blair when he finally steps down. The odds have been shortened to 9/1 as speculation grows that he could indirectly benefit from the new Tory leader's popularity.

Gordon Brown remains odds on to succeed Mr Blair but has been eased from 1/8 to 1/6 as the new kids on the block make their move.

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