

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

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### EPREUVE ORALE D'ANGLAIS

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#### **Next US President? Fat chance.**

By Andy McSmith

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In the country of the fat, the President must be thin, it seems. In the US, where two thirds of the population is overweight and more than a quarter is obese, a candidate for the highest office is under attack because his stomach sticks out over his capacious trousers.

Chris Christie, the straight-talking Governor of New Jersey, won himself a second term in office earlier this month by a crushing majority, in a state where Democrats outnumber Republicans by 700,000. His achievement in attracting a majority of the votes of women, despite his opposition to abortion rights, and Hispanics, and in making inroads into the youth and the black vote makes him the strongest contender for the Republican nomination in 2016.

However, though his opinions are, by UK standards, way to the right of centre, they are not right-wing enough for the GOP's strident Tea Party wing, some of whom evidently think they can block his candidature by raising doubts in the public mind about whether a fat man is fit to be President.

They do not use direct attacks to make his weight an issue, because that would carry obvious political risks in a country where obesity is sufficiently serious for the polling company Gallup to produce monthly reports on its progress. The current month's figures confirm that 2013 will be the worst year for obesity since monthly records began in 2008, with 27.2 per cent of the population classed as obese, 35.5 per cent overweight, and barely a third the right size.

It has also been alleged that Mitt Romney rejected having Christie as a running mate in 2012 solely because of his weight. Watching a video of Christie without a suit jacket, he is reported to have exclaimed: "Guys! Look at that!"

Journalists, too, have joined the game. *Time* magazine ran a cover with Christie pictured in silhouette behind the headline "The Elephant in the Room". Eugene Robinson, a commentator for the *Washington Post*, argued that in a country suffering an "epidemic" of obesity, it is legitimate to attack Christie for being overweight, adding: "I'd just like to offer him a bit of unsolicited, nonpartisan, sincere advice: eat a salad and take a walk." An opinion piece by a Bloomberg columnist, Michael Kinsley, came straight to the point in its opening sentence: "Look, I'm sorry, but New Jersey Governor Chris Christie cannot be President: he is just too fat."

We do not know how the British electorate would react to being asked to put a fat man or fat woman in Downing Street, because none of the main parties has fielded an overweight leader in the television era. However, when Edward Heath lost office in February 1974, he was secretly suffering from a thyroid condition that caused him to balloon while he was Leader of the Opposition. One Tory MP, Airey Neave, who saw him privately, thought that he was not fit to continue as party leader, looking so fat and red-faced. Heath did not resign, so Neave took on the job of managing Margaret Thatcher's leadership campaign.

The lesson was not lost on Baroness Thatcher, who was obsessively anxious about her own weight, surmising – probably correctly – that it would be a major problem for someone aspiring to be the UK's first woman Prime Minister to look as if her weight was out of control. Amid the stress of the 1979 general election campaign, she had a self-imposed daily diet sheet designed to make her lose 20lbs, which included a total ban on eating between meals.

The case made against fat leaders has been well made in American newspapers, where it has been written that a candidate looking like Chris Christie is a bad example to children, that a fat person's health is likely to give way under the stress of high office, and that someone who lacks the willpower to lose weight has not the mental strength to lead the country. There is perhaps another unspoken reason: it is fun to be prejudiced, and fat people who take up more room and consume more food than the rest of us are a group we feel we can insult without thinking badly of ourselves.

In a wealthy, stable society such as ours, or that of the US, where anyone can get fat but people struggle to stay slim, we prefer our leaders to look lean and fit rather than reassuringly enormous. It was rude of that commentator to tell Christie to eat salad and take a walk: but, realistically, it was not bad advice.