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Document 1 - Is British politics broken? Its centre is cracking

The two traditional parties of government are under siege as never before

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When Sir Keir Starmer was elected just over a year ago, Labour ministers warned that their government was Britain's last chance to see off populism. The political centre has sprung a leak even sooner than they feared. Just one in five voters now supports the government; Sir Keir's personal ratings as prime minister are dire. On September 5th Angela Rayner, his deputy, resigned over unpaid taxes, prompting a wide cabinet reshuffle.

5 The extremes, meanwhile, are all fired up. Whereas the Conservative Party is moribund, Nigel Farage, the leader of the hard-right Reform UK, told his party conference that he would be prime minister as soon as 2027. Although Reform has just four MPs, he is not delusional: were an election held tomorrow, Reform would have a coin-toss chance of a majority. Other insurgents sense their moment, too. Zack Polanski, a self-styled "eco-populist", is the new leader of the once-fusty Green Party, with a pitch to be the Farage of the left. Jeremy Corbyn, whose self-belief is undented by four and a

10 half calamitous years as the Labour Party's leader, is running a new hard-left outfit.

Britain is not the only democracy where the centre is crumbling. On September 8th [France's](#) centrist government fell over spending cuts, caught in a pincer of the hard left and right. In Germany the established centre parties have steadily lost votes, as the political system has fragmented. The middle is hollowing out in America, too, as voters are polarised between MAGA and a mob of fight-the-oligarchy lefties. The difference is that Sir Keir still has a commanding majority

15 in the House of Commons. He must use it.

Some believe the problem he faces is that British politics is plunged into incoherence. Voters, sick of low growth and failing public services, have become grouchy and fickle, ready to follow any party that lets them vent their frustration. The other theory is that Britons, fed up with immigration, are suddenly lurching towards nativism. Accordingly, Labour's stock is falling and Reform's is rising because voters are shifting en masse from the centre-left to the radical right.

20 Neither theory is correct.

In fact, the Brexit referendum of 2016 accelerated a trend in which age and education, rather than class, are the best predictors of [voting behaviour](#). Work by the British Election Study, a research project, shows how this is splitting left-leaning young graduates from right-leaning pensioners. At the same time, voters see political parties as clustered in two ideologically distinct blocs, on the left and the right.

25 Most of the volatility comes from Britons switching among parties within "their" bloc, not from one bloc to the other. Labour is losing voters to parties to its left; the Tories to Reform. In the general election of 2024, the two old parties won a combined vote share of 57%. That was the lowest since 1910, but it was a triumph compared with today's polls, which give them a total of just 39%.

An injection of fresh competition into Britain's stale two-party system should be healthy. Voters have been badly served; 30 no wonder they are shopping around for something better. In practice, however, it could make Britain much harder to govern. When electoral fragmentation meets Britain's ancient first-past-the-post voting system, it produces unpredictable results. Small shifts in votes can produce huge differences in each party's tally of parliamentary seats. First past the post inflates the importance of tactical voting, further distorting the relationship between how people vote and the governments they get. When support for a party subsides after an election, many more MPs fear that their seat 35 is in danger. This dampens the willingness to take risks. Hence, Labour is like a beached whale: it has a vast parliamentary majority, yet as its support has ebbed it has become paralysed.

For most of the 20th century, the tendency of elections to be won from the centre ground by parties with broad, stable coalitions was a force for moderate, reforming governments. But when the centre crumbles, the fringes call the shots. Prime ministers panic. They keep their bases sweet with giveaways or empty gestures. And they spend political capital 40 to rally their base against the enemy—which is why Sir Keir is eagerly pumping up the prospect of Prime Minister Farage.

These short-term measures have tactical advantages for the centre, but they are strategically self-defeating. When governing parties put off painful reforms that take time to pay off, they forgo the progress that ultimately boosts their chances of re-election. Consider the Tories, who spent a decade seeking to outbid Mr Farage. In doing so, they turned 45 the issue of Europe into a shrill electoral dividing line, and embarked on a senselessly "hard" Brexit. The far-reaching discontent that this caused has only fuelled Mr Farage. The Conservatives gambled their reputation for serious government to try to build a coalition that could keep winning. They ended up with neither.

That should be a warning for Sir Keir. Labour's long-term interest, and the country's, is in pursuing reforms that help revive Britain's anaemic growth and ease public anger. There are signs Sir Keir understands this. He has entrusted 50 planning to Steve Reed, a loyalist whose mantra is "build, baby, build"; Pat McFadden, a Blairite, will encourage underemployed young people to take jobs.

The centre cannot fold

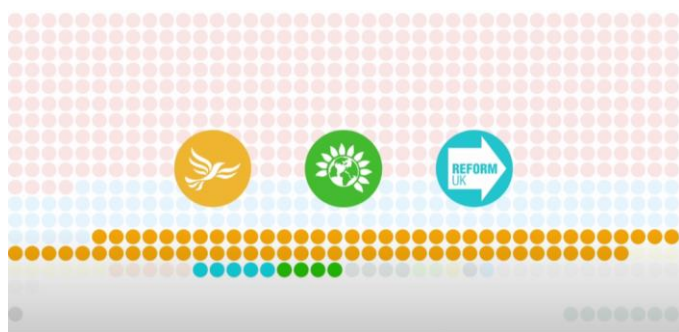
Since most of Labour's losses are to parties to its left, Sir Keir will face pressure at the Labour conference later this month to turn that way. Any cuts to welfare will face fierce opposition. Trade-union backers are growing restive. Senior 55 Labour MPs elected on a manifesto of strengthening the mandate of the Office for Budget Responsibility, an official fiscal watchdog, are calling for it to be sidelined, so they can borrow and spend more. Take that course, and Britain's economic malaise will deepen and the causes of voters' unhappiness will go unresolved. Rather than emerging as the fixer of Britain's broken centre, Sir Keir will have wasted the best chance to save it. ■

Document 2 – Infographic - How unpopular is Britain's Labour government?

Polling

<https://www.economist.com/interactive/2025-british-politics>

Document 3 - VIDEO – TDLR News - Is the UK Still a Two-Party System?



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNr_clZHrnc