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End of an era

The Tories' populist time in government ends with a historic defeat. But despite Labour's landslide victory, their path forward won't be easy

The UK has voted. Even before the official final results are in, it is already clear: the Labour Party under Keir Starmer has won a historic victory and will most likely be awarded over 400 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. A solid majority. The Conservative Party, on the other hand, has completely collapsed under the weight of the opposing votes. Compared to the last election in 2019, it has lost around 20 percentage points and will now have to take a seat on the opposition bench.

The Tories lost up to 15 per cent to the former Brexit party Reform UK. The deliberately late appearance of Nigel Farage, who only entered the race 14 days after the start of the campaign, split the populist camp, cost the Tories more votes and put populism in the UK in its place for the time being. With four seats in the Reform UK party and a few remaining right-wing populist votes in the Tories, such as former Home Secretary Suella Braverman, it has been channelled and contained in a new core Tory parliamentary group. That said, Farage's party will remain a populist thorn in the side of the Tories. But his movement, which came from nothing to win almost 15 per cent of the vote, also remains a challenge for the Labour Party.

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From the north to the south of England, from constituencies such as North Shropshire or South Swindon, which have traditionally voted Conservative, Labour achieved a lead of up to 20 percentage points in some cases. In addition, in some of these constituencies, tactical voters gave their vote to the Liberal Democrats, who won over 70 seats with around 12 per cent of the vote. This trend is confirmed in Scotland. Despite being on the left of the spectrum, the Scottish National Party, which is no less populist, has not been able to improve the lives of people north of Hadrian's Wall in 17 years in

government, but has instead discredited itself with a corruption scandal. It received less than three per cent of all votes cast nationwide and lost almost 40 seats in Westminster. In Scotland, too, the Labour Party has now regained trust.

Since 2010, the Tories, and with them British democracy, had undergone a steady and gradual development towards populism. The creation of a movement (Brexit) as the product of a modernisation crisis? Check. A disturbed social balance? Check. The instrumentalisation of 'identity' as a key issue? Check. What all populists in Europe have in common is their defensive stance towards European integration. Since the Tories came to power in 2010, just two years after the financial and euro crisis, 'the EU' has also become the most important anti-issue for right-wing and left-wing populists such as Jeremy Corbyn in the UK.

The effects of the austerity that followed the crisis, the missed structural change in the north and the negative consequences of globalisation, such as increasing wage competition, could be perfectly instrumentalised to mobilise against 'the establishment' in London or Brussels. Conservative heads of government Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak repeatedly put their finger in the wound and emphasised the supposedly lost room for manoeuvre of the formerly sovereign state until parts of society actually no longer felt adequately represented. British involvement at the supranational and transnational level was presented not as a profit but as a loss. Democratic control should once again take its place exclusively within the framework of the nation state. There was even agreement with parts of the Labour Party on this issue. To date, the EU has not really found an answer to this representation gap.

What remains of the populist experiment?

Sunak, the last of the Tory era, lacked the charisma needed for a populist movement. Nevertheless, he served the narrative that the Tories were actually an anti-party force. When he ran on the slogan of 'change' – despite his party's 14 years in government – the populist engine ground to a halt.

In contrast to Germany, the UK did not go through any of the usual strategic phases of the other established parties, such as strict marginalisation, thematic or rhetorical alignment or even formal cooperation in coalitions. The majority voting system in the UK creates

different conditions. The populist experiment was run through from start to finish and ended drastically with the election on 4 July. The loss of almost 250 seats for the Conservative Party is like a reckoning.

There was no other strategy that could have permanently reduced the populists' popularity on the island than to let history take its course. The system of first-past-the-post traditionally creates a different clarity. The population had promoted a populist party to power, now it has punished them. The economic and social damage, however, is immense.

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Both electoral successes, Johnson's triumph in 2019 and Starmer's historic victory in 2024, were landslide victories. They acted like a digital lever: on – off. However, it was not the Labour Party's convincing programme that persuaded people to vote for it. 'What would you say is the most important reason you are voting Labour?' YouGov asked before the election. 'To get the Tories out' was the overwhelming response from interviewees.

It remains to be seen which path the 'punished' Tories will now take. Will they succeed in rebuilding themselves in opposition under moderate forces such as Jeremy Hunt or James Cleverly with the motto: back to their roots? Or will they succumb to the 'charm' of Farage and seek to close ranks with the right-wing populist? The UK's eight-hundred-year-old democracy has proven to be resilient. In the next 10 years, none of the players responsible for 'Broken Britain' will ever sit on the government bench again.

So, what remains of the populist experiment? Well, it has exposed representation deficits in British politics that Starmer's party needs to address. He will not be able to rest on his laurels and trust that a new generation of young people, disappointed by Brexit and living in a depleted state, will simply trust that things will get better at some point. Not only the Conservatives, but also the Labour Party were forced to make corrections and will have to help bring the system back into balance.

According to Starmer, an anti-populist, factual politics will once again take centre stage. 'Stability is change' is now the name of the not very revolutionary-sounding programme. The aim is 'not to preach, but to listen', says General Secretary David Evans. People must be able to 'feel immediately' that a Labour government will 'make a difference to their lives'. Only by attacking the evil of populism at its roots, by solving the

immense social problems, could we succeed. Only a policy that strengthens social and economic cohesion and takes people's need for belonging and a common identity more seriously could manage to at least partially deprive populism of its grounds for protest.

Regaining trust

Never since 1908 has the share of the vote for both major parties been as low as in this election. This warning must be enough to rally the new, huge Labour group in Parliament and create cohesion. 'Hope', says Starmer, 'trust' and 'confidence' is what the British people need now. A new, very strict code of conduct for MPs is intended to restore lost trust in politics. The focus is on the rapid implementation of a total of five 'missions': clean energy, fighting crime, promoting education, reforming the National Health Service (NHS) and – most prominently – promoting economic growth via a green industrial strategy.

Compared to this historic majority, Labour can only lose in every further vote from now on. The new prime minister is still seen by many as boring. However, perhaps in future it will no longer need an emotional speech according to the populist textbook, but simply statistics that prove that Labour can do better. An EU that overcomes its Brexit phantom pain and does not categorically insist on rigid third-country regulations, but instead sees Starmer as a strategic partner in view of the geopolitical situation, would certainly be of great help to him in combating populism.

Starmer's victory suggests that there has been no long-term realignment, but that the old tribal loyalties in Britain, where people vote out of habit, are no longer as strong as they used to be. British voters are quite prepared to judge politicians harshly if they are seen to have failed. A landslide victory in one election does not therefore make defeat impossible in the next.



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