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To conserve or to reform? The reshaping of the right in British politics

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Abstract

The right of British politics is being reshaped, threatening the dominant position of the Conservative Party. This paper analyses the symbiotic relationship between the Conservatives and Reform UK. It argues that both parties now represent and articulate what can be most accurately described as populist conservatism. This populist conservatism in part reflects the rise of national conservatism globally, but it is also a distinctively British phenomenon with its roots and development decisively shaped by the electoral competition on the right in the UK over several decades. Possible scenarios for the future of the right are explored. The dynamic competition between the two parties is reinforcing the dominance of populist conservatism on the right of British politics. A pact between the two would reinforce this further.

Keywords Conservative Party · Reform UK · Kemi Badenoch · Nigel Farage · Populist conservatism

Introduction

On any measure, the outcome of the 2024 general election was a disaster for the Conservative Party. Its share of the vote collapsed by twenty percentage points to the lowest in the party's history, in the biggest ever reversal for an incumbent government in Britain (Heath et al. 2025, p. 91), and its final tally of 121 seats was the worst for the Conservatives since 1832, and fell well short even of the 165 retained in New Labour's landslide victory of 1997. After 14 years of crisis and instability in office, the party's statecraft was in tatters and its reputation for governing competence was badly damaged (Hayton 2024). In the aftermath of such a calamity, the Conservatives might quite reasonably have been expected to sink into despondency and faction fighting, and—perhaps most despairingly of

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all, for a party that often appears to regard itself as uniquely qualified to operate the UK state's creaking levers of power—irrelevance.

Yet six months on from the general election, the Conservatives continued to exhibit a level of optimism about their electoral prospects that belied the precarity of their position. A survey of Conservative Party members conducted in November 2024, for example, found that four in ten anticipated returning to power with a majority at the next general election, with a further three in ten expecting to do so either as a minority government or as part of a Conservative-led coalition. Just one in seven expected Labour to win a second term in office as a majority government (Hill 2024). This expectant outlook was no doubt fuelled by the shaky start of the Starmer government, described as 'bafflingly bad' by one observer from across the Atlantic (Knight 2024). The early months of the new administration became bogged down in a row over the removal of the winter fuel allowance from most pensioners; a scandal over accepting personal gifts from a party donor, Lord Alli, who was issued with a Downing Street security pass; and a power struggle at the heart of government which led to the departure of the Prime Minister's chief of staff in October. The government's difficulties contributed to the upbeat atmosphere at the 2024 Conservative Party conference, which led observers to wonder 'why are the Conservatives so happy?' (BBC 2024; Webber 2024). In the (admittedly unsympathetic) eyes of the political staff of *The Guardian*, the event was characterised by 'denial about the scale of the defeat, exaggeration of Labour's teething troubles in government, and delusion about the party's chances of returning quickly' (Mason et al. 2024). Nonetheless, the leadership contest to succeed Rishi Sunak did not degenerate into recrimination and retribution. By the end of 2024, a modest increase in support for the Conservatives and a slide in support for Labour left both parties neck and neck in the opinion polls on 26–27%.

The relatively buoyant Conservative mood, although misplaced, also reflected a sense of relief about the election result itself, which while abysmal, was not quite the catastrophic wipeout that many Tories had feared. This sentiment was expressed by the former Chancellor, George Osborne, in his initial reaction to the exit poll on election night, when he noted:

> It'd be a huge mistake to take a lot of comfort from this, but there were people thinking and the polls were suggesting it could be an extinction night for the Tory Party, an extinction level event, and the Tory Party would never come back. I think there'll be a lot of Conservatives saying we can come back. (ITV News 2024).

In spite of everything, from Partygate to Trussonomics, the Conservatives had seemingly been granted a reprieve of sorts by the electorate, retaining their position as one of the two largest parties in Parliament and therefore the status of the Official Opposition, which some polls had indicated the Liberal Democrats might seize. Reform, which had advanced in the opinion polls during the campaign and even crept ahead of the Conservatives in several, failed to outpoll them on election night. In the event, the 'inflection point' trumpeted by Reform's cheerleaders in the commentariat, such as the former academic Matthew Goodwin (2024),

failed to materialise. Although the aggregate vote for the Conservatives had more than halved from nearly 14 million in 2019 to 6.8 million in 2024, it was still comfortably ahead of Farage's party. Reform's final tally of 4.1 million votes (14.3%) exceeded the previous high of 3.9 million (12.6%) achieved by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) in 2015, but fell well short of Nigel Farage's prediction three weeks before polling day that his party would be backed by over 6 million voters (Wingate 2024).

The Conservative Party lived, just about, to fight another day. Its position was, however, precarious. As a classic catch-all party, a longstanding pillar of the Conservative's electoral strategy has been to dominate the right of the political spectrum, and to exploit the first-past-the-post electoral system to defeat an array of opponents ranged against it. In more recent decades, the task has been complicated by the presence of not only the centrist Liberal Democrats but the growing electoral challenge from the Eurosceptic populist right (Hayton 2021). In 2019, the Conservatives mobilised a broad-based coalition of support around the Brexit issue, co-opting support from the populist right. However, in 2024 this fractured, as Reform won 5 seats and finished in second place in a further 98. As Chris Prosser observed, Labour's victory did not derive from winning over substantial numbers of Conservative voters, 'but because the right-conservative vote was fragmented, and despite the fragmentation of the left-liberal vote' (Prosser 2024: 11). Moreover, as he notes, 'future elections will likely be shaped by competition within these blocs as much as competition between them' (*ibid.*). The battlelines between the parties have been redrawn, with consequences for the electoral and ideological contests of the coming years.

In this context, the electoral prospects of the Conservative Party therefore depend more than ever on the capacity of its leadership to manage and attenuate the threat posed by Reform. Conversely, the capacity of Nigel Farage to bring about the 'political revolution' he has promised at the next general election, in which he anticipates Parliament to be filled with 'hundreds of newcomers under the Reform UK label' (quoted in Balls 2024) is contingent upon displacing the Conservatives as the primary opponent to Labour across large areas of the country. In this paper, I analyse the relationship between the Conservatives and Reform and suggest that the right of British politics is being fundamentally reshaped. This transformation of the right in Britain can be located within the global rise of national conservatism, driven in part by 'the crises of neoliberal globalisation since the 2000s' (Altinors and Chryssogelos 2024, p. 995). As such, the rise of Reform UK might be seen as part of the long tail of the global financial crisis of 2008, the fallout from which has underpinned much of the instability in British politics that has been a feature of the subject matter of this journal for most of its existence (Gamble 2009; Stanley et al. 2025). But it is also characterised by particularities specific to the British case, understood as the latest phase of an ongoing 'symbiotic relationship' between the mainstream right in the shape of the Conservative Party and the populist Eurosceptic right, in the form of UKIP and its successors (Bale 2018). The paper reviews the history of this rivalry and interrogates this relationship in terms of the ideological contest and the electoral one. It then sketches out some possible future scenarios as to how the politics of the right could play out over the coming years, concluding that an accommodation of

some sort between the two parties is possible, but that even without this the symbiosis between them will fuel the reshaping of the British right in a national populist direction.

Rivals on the right

Over the past two decades, academic interest in party competition on the right in Britain has grown considerably, with a number of important contributions appearing in the pages of this journal. The first paper that focused on Conservative politics published in *British Politics* was by David Sanders (2006), reflecting on the 2005 general election result. Sanders presciently anticipated that a shift towards the centre ground would increase the Conservative Party's vote share at the next election, but by an insufficient degree to secure an overall majority—an outcome which came to pass in 2010. Notably, his analysis did not encompass discussion of electoral adversaries to the Conservatives' right, even though both UKIP (from 2.2 to 3.1%) and the BNP (from 0.7 to 1.9%) went on to increase their vote share at the 2010 election. The challenge posed by UKIP was, however, given considerable attention by Peter Dorey (2007), in his influential early assessment of Conservative modernization under Cameron (see also Andrew Denham and Kieron O'Hara (2007) in the same issue). As Dorey highlighted, the electoral threat posed by UKIP was already a significant source of concern to right-wing Conservatives in this period, who were afraid that Cameron's centrist strategy would drive their core supporters towards UKIP. Although Cameron initially sought to dismiss UKIP supporters as 'fruitcakes, loonies and closet racists, mostly', this fear effectively acted as a brake on modernization in some areas, such as immigration and European policy (Hayton 2018). Later assessments of Cameron's project to modernize the party (such as those published in volume 10 of *British Politics*) would concur that it created 'political space into which moved a reinvigorated UKIP, creating an historic schism on the Right' (Lynch 2015: 186).

Founded in 1993, UKIP itself received surprisingly little direct academic attention in the 2000s, despite its presence in the European Parliament from 1999 onwards. At the 2004 European elections it advanced to third place, with 12 MEPs and 16% of the vote, prompting Simon Usherwood (2008) to analyse the dilemmas UKIP faced as a single-issue hard-Eurosceptic party; and analysis from Peter John and Helen Margetts (2009) which argued that UKIP voters were a source of latent support for the extreme right. In the 2009 European Parliament elections UKIP finished in second place, prompting further analysis of the party's influence on the mainstream right, and the warning that 'UKIP's success could signal a more generalised shift towards the acceptance of the populist right in Britain' (Hayton 2010: 27).

In a crucial intervention in *British Politics,* Lynch and Whitaker (2013) analysed how the 'rivalry on the right' between the Conservatives and UKIP influenced the positioning of each in relation to European integration. They narrate the Conservative attempts to diffuse the issue and lower its salience in an effort to marginalise UKIP, who in turn sought to broaden their appeal to Conservative voters by

emphasising issues such as immigration. This 'symbiotic relationship' was further traced by Tim Bale (2018, p. 263), whose analysis demonstrated how it was the Conservatives who first fused populism and Euroscepticism—a strategy then adopted by UKIP—rather than the other way around. This is an important corrective to the widely held assumption that the Conservatives have simply drifted towards populism in response to pressure from the radical right, when the process has in truth been a much more dynamic one (as we shall discuss later with regards to Reform).

Support for UKIP gradually rose throughout the 2010–2015 parliament. By the end of 2012, Nigel Farage's party was averaging 10% in the polls, and it stayed consistently in double figures over the remainder of the parliament. In 2014, the party shot to political prominence through victory in the elections to the European Parliament, winning 24 seats and 26.6% of the vote, pushing the Conservatives into third place. That autumn two Conservative MPs resigned their seats and defected to UKIP, triggering by-elections which they both won, giving UKIP its first elected Members of Parliament at Westminster. The same year the party attracted substantial academic interest, notably with the publication of *Revolt on the Right*, by Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin. In this key text, Ford and Goodwin (2014) advanced the thesis that UKIP's growing support derived from the 'left behind'—namely older, less educated, white working-class voters. This implied that the party posed a particular challenge to Labour, particularly in what would later be characterised as the 'red wall'—areas of the Midlands and Northern England which would go on to vote strongly in favour of leaving the European Union in 2016. Research by Mellon and Evans (2016) questioned the extent to which UKIP was drawing support from Labour supporters, but the left-behind narrative took hold in political discourse and appeared to offer a compelling explanation for the Brexit vote. What was essentially an elite-driven project was consequently widely portrayed as a (white) working-class revolt, with parallels drawn to the election of Donald Trump as US president later the same year (Inglehart and Norris 2016; Mondon and Winter 2019). This characterisation occurred despite the fact the majority of English Leave voters lived in the south and that 59% of all Leave voters were middle class, and that Conservative voters were much more likely to have backed Brexit than Labour voters (Dorling 2020; Alabrese et al. 2019).

In the aftermath of the EU referendum, the Conservatives quickly adopted a relatively hardline position, with new Prime Minister Theresa May declaring that 'Brexit means Brexit' and ruling out continued membership of both the Single Market and the Customs Union. At the 2017 general election, Brexit became a key electoral cleavage with the Conservatives recruiting Leave voters from across the board, but particularly at the expense of UKIP, who lost 57% of their 2015 vote in defections to May's party (Mellon et al. 2018, p. 732). The collapse in support for UKIP (from 12.6 to 1.8%) combined with the loss of its *raison d'etre* seemingly spelled the end of the road for the party, with the Conservatives now occupying its hard-Eurosceptic territory. However, unable to secure parliamentary approval for the Withdrawal Agreement her government negotiated with the EU Theresa May was forced to postpone the UK's departure date, necessitating British participation in the 2019 elections to the European Parliament. In a dramatic return to frontline electoral politics, Nigel Farage, who had stood down as UKIP leader shortly after the referendum,

launched the Brexit Party in April 2019. Just six weeks later it triumphed in the European elections, winning 30.5% of the vote and 29 seats. With just 8.8%, the Conservatives slumped to fifth place, their worst ever result in a nationwide poll, and Theresa May resigned.

The battle to succeed May as Conservative leader took place in the context of this result, and with the Brexit Party continuing to top opinion polls. Conservative MPs feared this 'existential threat' (Sunak et al. 2019) and Conservative members prioritised leaving the EU over the survival of their own party (Hayton 2022, p. 350). The success of the Brexit Party therefore assisted Boris Johnson, who echoed Farage's call for the UK to leave the EU without any further delay—with or without a Brexit deal (Dennison 2020). Johnson won the party leadership by a convincing margin on this basis and set about completing the transformation of the Conservatives into the party of Brexit, banishing Ministers and MPs who would not back this position (Hayton 2022). Having negotiated a revised Withdrawal Agreement, but still unable to secure its swift parliamentary passage, the new Prime Minister was forced to accept a further delay to Article 50 in return for a general election. Johnson rejected the offer of formal pact with the Brexit Party, but Farage then unilaterally decided to stand down his candidates in Conservative held seats, for fear of splitting the Brexit vote (Dennison 2020). This helped Johnson consolidate the Leave vote and triumph with a majority of 80, although analysis suggested that the continued presence of Brexit Party candidates in opposition seats did help Labour retain around 25 seats that might have otherwise fallen to the Conservatives (Curtice et al. 2021).

Conservative victory at the 2019 general election meant that a hard Brexit was assured. With its defining issue seemingly settled, the Brexit Party might have been expected to wither and die. Instead, Farage opted for a diversification strategy, and rebranded the party Reform UK (Dennison 2020). While it retained its Eurosceptic heritage and credentials, this move signposted the evolution into a fully-fledged right-wing populist party, unbound from its single-issue past. It is this movement that the Conservative Party, itself increasingly populist, confronts in the 2020s. While this is a site of electoral competition it is also one of intellectual and ideological cross-pollination, particularly through the increasingly prominent, well-funded, and well-organised network of think-tanks, media outlets, and commentators sympathetic to the populist radical right. This ideological and electoral relationship is explored in the sections that follow.

Populist conservatism: the ideological interrelationships on the right

While it is still just about possible to advance a plausible case that the post-Brexit Conservative Party remains a 'broad church, comprised of a plurality of intellectual traditions' (Beech 2023, p. 21), it is an argument that is increasingly difficult to sustain. Over several decades, as Peter Dorey has observed in this journal, 'intellectually, the Conservative Party has atrophied' (2025, p. 22). Key to this, as he notes, has been the entrenchment of Thatcherism as the dominant ideological outlook of the parliamentary party. The purge of opponents to a hard Brexit by Boris Johnson further reduced ideological diversity within the party. Following

the loss of two thirds of Conservative seats at the 2024 election, the number of MPs associated with the Tory Reform Group (the standard bearer for the 'One Nation' left of the party since the 1970s) had fallen to just half a dozen (Jeffery 2024).

More fundamentally, however, the intellectual landscape of the British right has shifted, with the ideas of the populist nationalist right increasingly crowding out the more moderate centre-right. While the presence of such ideas is nothing new, their prominence and increasing prevalence has led to a 'narrowing of the British conservative mind' (Ellis 2022). The Brexit process was an important episode in this shift in that the hard Brexiteers secured a comprehensive victory within the Conservative Party over their more pragmatist colleagues. More widely, this dominant position has been attained through a highly effective media strategy, drawing together traditional outlets such as the right-wing press, think-tanks, social media (where a multitude of right-wing activists have garnered substantial followings), academics, the blogosphere, and a proliferation of podcasts. The launch of GB News in 2021, and the purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk in 2022, further enhanced the platforming of what Charlie Ellis (2022, p. 683) labels 'the hard right'. This thriving ecosystem is increasingly interconnected with the Trumpian American right and the National Conservatism movement, for example in terms of its funding (Geoghegan 2024). It provides ready outlets, profitable employment, and powerful amplification of voices from the right of the Conservative Party, Reform UK, and beyond.

One figure that typifies this network is the former Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg. Elected to Parliament in 2010, during the Cameron era the former investment fund manager was a relatively obscure backbencher, heavily involved in the hard-Eurosceptic European Research Group (ERG). In 2013 he courted controversy by addressing the annual dinner of the far-right Traditional Britain Group (he later declared this decision 'a mistake'), but was best known for his eccentric mannerisms, love of arcane parliamentary procedure and Edwardian style. As Chair of the ERG, he rose to prominence during the Brexit process and joined the government under Boris Johnson. Active on social media, he presented 'The Moggcast' podcast on Conservative Home from 2018 to 2023, amassed over half a million followers on Twitter/X, and since 2023 has hosted his own GB News show, 'State of the Nation'. An associate of former chief strategist to Donald Trump, Steve Bannon—who praised him as 'one of the best thinkers in the Conservative movement on a global basis' (LBC 2018)—Rees-Mogg addressed the National Conservatism conference in London in 2023, and in September 2024 (having lost his seat at the general election) called for an electoral pact between the Conservatives and Reform UK to help the right return to power (*Daily Telegraph* 2024). Reform's leader, Nigel Farage, is a colleague of Rees-Mogg's at GB News, and the most high-profile figure on the right in Britain. During the 2024 general election campaign, Farage was able to leverage his own enormous social media following to drive more engagement through his Facebook and Twitter accounts than all the other leaders of the major political parties combined (Hagopian 2024). This right-wing ecosystem consequently facilitates populist messaging and reach, and while its members may be political rivals, they draw on the same intellectual community and are part of the same ideological family.

Using political science terminology, Reform UK can be most sensibly classified as a populist radical right party. This places it outside of the mainstream right and as part of the far right, but distinguishes it from the extreme right elements of the far right (Bale 2024). The mainstream right can also be subdivided, with Christian democrats, Conservatives and Liberals being the most common subtypes. The Conservative Party would therefore be classified as part of the mainstream right, which must contend with radical right competitors (Hayton 2021). One problem with this distinction is that it risks obscuring the extent to which the Conservatives and Reform UK have a common ideological heritage and outlook. Consequently, I suggest in this paper that both parties now represent and articulate what can be accurately described as populist conservatism. This label better captures than alternatives (such as national populism) the fact that this outlook is deeply rooted in the British conservative tradition, while acknowledging the burgeoning populist style of politics which Conservative statecraft was traditionally more suspicious of (Hayton 2024). This populist conservatism sits within the transnational political family that Altinors and Chryssogelos (2024) term 'national-conservatism', which seeks to defend neoliberalism, albeit no longer in a framework of untrammelled globalisation. Whereas national populism rejects liberal globalisation and scorns elites (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018), populist conservatism seeks to legitimise (some) Conservative national elites and defend Conservative values: elites are not rejected per se, but where they are deemed not sufficiently or truly Conservative.

As a new political party, Reform UK lacks the ideological lineage of its older rival. One problem with attempting to identify its ideological position is the extent to which it is the personal vehicle of its leader, Nigel Farage. Unusually for a political party, Reform was founded as a private limited company, with Farage holding a majority of the shares. Ahead of the party's conference in September 2024, it was reported that he planned to surrender his ownership of the party (BBC News, 19.09.2024), but as of January 2025 Farage remains listed on the Companies House website as the owner of the majority of shares in Reform UK, with Richard Tice MP (the Deputy Leader) holding a minority stake. The party's 2024 election manifesto promised significant cuts to income tax, stamp duty, business rates and corporation tax; to cut regulation; to freeze 'non-essential' immigration and to deport all illegal immigrants and foreign criminals; to leave the European Convention on Human Rights; to 'scrap net zero'; tax relief for private school fees and private healthcare; and increased spending on policing, criminal justice, and defence (Reform UK 2024). While presented in populist language, this broadly Thatcherite vision for Britain is one that many Conservatives are sympathetic towards. Recent analysis of the beliefs of Reform supporters found that they occupy 'a fairly traditionalist conservative ideological position but one which is also characterised by elements of economic left populism' (Smith 2024). The growth in support for Reform since the general election has come overwhelmingly from Conservative voters, driven particularly by their immigration policies (YouGov 2025a).

Farage began his political journey as a Conservative activist, resigning from the party in 1992 over the Maastricht Treaty. In the eyes of Jacob Rees-Mogg, Farage 'is essentially a Conservative in most of his views' (GB News, 6.2.2024), or as he put it on another occasion a 'proper Tory, really, who's just fallen out of love with

the Tory party' (quoted in Li and Lenahan 2024). The Reform leader is, in his own words, 'a great admirer of the Conservative tradition' (Farage 2001) but regards that as one that has been betrayed by the party that bears its name. As a self-declared Thatcherite, Farage argued UKIP were the 'true inheritors' of Thatcher's legacy on Europe (Tournier-Sol 2015: 145). He has made no secret of his admiration for Enoch Powell, who he named as his political hero, and defended the 'basic principle' of Powell's notorious 'rivers of blood' speech (Mason 2014). On the other hand, he has sought to distance himself from figures such as the jailed far-right activist Tommy Robinson (real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon), even when in early-2025 Robinson attracted the support of Elon Musk in his campaign for release from prison. This desire to distance himself from the extreme right, while no doubt driven at least in part by strategic calculation, has been a consistent feature of Farage's politics. Populism has nonetheless been a key element in Farage's political style and success, and a consistent feature of his rhetoric, which 'exemplifies populist discourse' (Bull et al. 2024, p. 187).

Populism also became a defining feature of UKIP's politics—although having begun life as a single-issue party this was something it grew into, rather than being conceived as. For Simon Usherwood, this shift towards populism reflected 'the fundamental lack of a party ideology', with populism for UKIP 'very much a matter of style and strategy, rather than ideology' (2019, p. 1212). Nonetheless, careful analysis of the development of UKIP's web of beliefs and acknowledged influences reveals the centrality of the British conservative tradition, 'especially Powellism and Thatcherism as an expression of Tory populism' (Tournier-Sol 2015, p. 146). Unsurprisingly given the ongoing supremacy of Farage, Reform UK remains in this populist conservative space.

The contest to elect a new Conservative leader to succeed Rishi Sunak illustrated the extent to which populist conservatism now dominates the ideological debate on the right. The eventual winner, Kemi Badenoch, declared in her conference speech that she would bring about a Conservative 'renewal based on personal responsibility, family, sovereignty, and capitalism' (Badenoch 2024a). She also said that: 'The mission is to return to traditional conservative values, which in my view have been eroding as successive Tory governments have given too much ground to the left' (Badenoch 2024b). At the heart of the Conservative leader's thesis is the populist assertion that the state has been captured by 'a new bureaucratic class' which is strangling economic growth, blocking public sector reform and destroying the fabric of society. Moreover, the progressive ideology it advances (at the expense of the people) seeks to 'replace the nation state with a new multicultural society, managed by the bureaucratic class itself' (Badenoch et al. 2024, p. 9). Badenoch positively revels in being compared to Thatcher, who she described as her 'idol' (2024b). With false modesty she noted that although it 'would be presumptuous for me to make that comparison' she is 'sometimes described as Margaret Thatcher's natural heir' (2024b). Not to be outdone in venerating the longest-serving Conservative Prime Minister, her main rival for the leadership, Robert Jenrick revealed to the party conference that his chosen middle name for his daughter was Thatcher. Jenrick's campaign for the leadership was characterised by Thatcherite messages and populist language, particularly in relation to immigration and multiculturalism. The once-staunchly conservative

commentator Peter Oborne (2024) condemned Jenrick for his 'bigoted remarks' and 'far-right and deeply divisive views', and despaired that the Conservative Party was 'mutating at high speed into a far-right movement comparable to the anti-immigrant Alternative für Deutschland'.

Appointed as Shadow Justice Secretary under Badenoch's leadership, Jenrick has continued to ratchet up his rhetoric, and received backing from his party leader when doing so. For example, in January 2025 after social media pressure from figures including Elon Musk and Nigel Farage, Kemi Badenoch joined the calls for a national inquiry into the grooming gangs scandal, which related to a number of 'high-profile cases where groups of men—mainly of Pakistani descent—were convicted of sexually abusing and raping predominantly young white girls in towns such as Rotherham and Rochdale' (BBC News 2025). In Jenrick's assessment,

> The scandal started with the onset of mass migration. Importing hundreds of thousands of people from alien cultures, who possess medieval attitudes towards women, brought us here. And after 30 years of this disastrous experiment, we now have entrenched sectarian voting blocs that make it electoral suicide for some MPs to confront this. This scandal shows why we must end it. (Jenrick 2025)

While this tweet drew condemnation from his opponents and led the Prime Minister to suggest Conservatives were amplifying the far-right, Jenrick was defended by Badenoch. It also serves to illustrate how the ideological overlap with Reform UK, with the two parties effectively in populist competition with each other. In Nigel Farage's assessment, Jenrick's campaign for the Conservative leadership was characterised by efforts to 'out-Farage Farage' (ITV Politics 2024) and this is an approach he has continued despite not becoming leader. The overall effect of leading Conservatives positioning their party in this way is to mainstream the reorientation of the discourse of the right of British politics onto the reactionary Powellite territory more obviously associated with Reform UK. However, leading figures from both parties have demonstrated an unwillingness to embrace fully the ethnonationalism of Enoch Powell. As noted above in relation to Tommy Robinson, Farage has consistently sought to put distance between himself and the extreme right in Britain. Kemi Badenoch has proclaimed her opposition to identity politics and has instead sought to articulate a form of nationalist politics based on conservative values rather than ethnicity. This is a post-liberal articulation of conservatism (Pitt and Blond 2024) but is open to ethnic minorities (such as the Conservative leader) as long as they are willing to embrace this Conservative interpretation of British history, culture, and identity. Badenoch consequently despaired at the results of a recent survey that found that almost half of young Britons regard their country as racist, and blamed this outcome on multiculturalism and a lack of integration (Badenoch 2025). Her 'vision' is of Britain as 'a country where people can find a shared identity' (Badenoch, 2024a). As with other forms of national conservatism, in both Badenoch's and Farage's pronouncements, it is infused with populism. The difference between 'mainstream' conservatism and the far right, while always arguably more a matter of degree than a fundamental distinction, has thus become decidedly blurred.

To compete or to co-operate? The electoral dilemma for the right

While Kemi Badenoch is by no means the first Conservative leader to face the question of how to deal with the populist radical right, in the first few months of her tenure that issue became particularly acute. By the time she reached the milestone of 100 days as leader in February 2025, several national opinion polls had placed Reform UK top with around 26% of the vote, ahead of both the Conservatives and Labour. Over the proceeding few months, a series of stories highlighting surging membership of Reform (surpassing that of the Conservative Party in December and exceeding 200,000 in February) and high-profile Conservative defections only served to fuel this sense of momentum. The defectors included former MPs Aidan Burley, Andrea Jenkyns, and Marco Longhi; the influential founder of ConservativeHome, Tim Montgomerie; the billionaire businessman and former Conservative donor Nick Candy (who became Reform UK's treasurer in December 2024); and Rael Braverman, the husband of the former Home Secretary Suella Braverman.

Given the significant ideological overlap between Reform UK and the Conservative right, it was unsurprising that this situation led to increasing speculation that a deal might be done between the two parties. Suella Braverman blamed the rise of Reform on Conservative failures to reduce immigration, cut taxes and 'stand up for commonsense patriotic values', and—noting that the combined support level for Reform and the Conservatives was around half the electorate—suggested she would favour 'whatever it takes to stop another Labour administration' (LBC 2025). Former Conservative Party Chairman Brandon Lewis similarly argued that 'the Right cannot win while it is split' and that a pact was required to avoid disaster in the upcoming local elections, and the Editor of ConservativeHome agreed that the electoral maths 'makes for an obvious temptation' (Dilnot 2025).

Analysis of the 2024 election found that the combined vote share of the Conservatives and Reform UK exceeded that achieved by the winner in 137 Labour seats and 26 of those secured by the Liberal Democrats (Prosser 2024: 9). It was also the case that support for Reform came overwhelmingly from former Conservative voters, with the Brexit divide continuing to act as a key electoral cleavage (*ibid*.). Finding a way to reunite the Leave-based coalition of support assembled by Boris Johnson in 2019 therefore suggests itself as a route to the electoral recovery of the right in Britain. Despite this apparent logic, there are a number of barriers to any such deal. Most obviously, it has been dismissed by both leaders, with Kemi Badenoch describing the idea as 'for the birds' and warning that it would repel Conservative voters who did not like Farage (*Daily Telegraph* 2025). For his part, Farage has variously referred to his desire to destroy the Conservative Party, and expressed his anger about Boris Johnson's refusal to co-operate with the Brexit Party in 2019. Riding high in the polls in 2025, there is certainly little incentive for Farage to rush into any arrangement. There is also the question of whether it would be welcomed by the supporters of either party. A survey in January 2025 found that a merger of the two parties was backed by 50% of

Conservatives and 46% of Reform UK voters, but the idea was opposed by 35% of Conservatives and 44% of Reform UK voters, respectively (YouGov 2025b). An earlier poll of Reform UK supporters (shortly before the general election) found that despite in large part having previously voted Conservative, they were now hostile to the party, with three quarters having a negative opinion of the Conservatives and four in ten holding a 'very unfavourable' view (YouGov 2024).

Sketched in simple terms, there are four main possible futures for the right in Britain. The first—Badenoch's aim—is that the Conservative Party recovers in the opinion polls and reasserts its traditional position as the dominant force on the right. The second is that Reform UK usurps the Conservatives, who in turn suffer a fate similar to the Liberal Party when it was displaced by Labour in the first half of twentieth century. The third scenario is a new era of co-operation, whether that be through a merger or (more likely) an electoral pact of some sort. Or fourthly, a continuation of something like the current position, with both parties competing for the same pool of voters and receiving similar levels of support (sharing 40 to 50% of electorate between them). Such a situation is unlikely to prove sustainable for the long term and will fuel demands for co-operation.

While it seems very unlikely that Reform UK will disappear completely, the likelihood of Conservative revival should not be overly discounted. Despite their current problems, the Conservatives retain a number of institutional advantages, not least their position in Parliament as the official opposition, their history, reputation, and traditional electoral positioning as the 'natural party of government' in Britain. At the time of writing, they have over 5,000 elected councillors across the UK and representation in the Scottish and Welsh parliaments and the London Assembly. The well-established network of local Conservative associations across the country, although dependent on a far smaller number of members than in decades past, continues to provide an institutional structure through which to organise the party's campaigning efforts on the ground. Reform UK, by contrast, has (following the suspension by the party of Rupert Lowe in March 2025) just four MPs and tens of councillors. Its party organisation is nascent, with the rollout of local branches only commencing in August 2024. Although its membership base has expanded rapidly, the extent to which this will translate into a well-organised and motivated 'people's army' of volunteers is untested. Support for Reform is also widely spread geographically, making building up local or regional strongholds more difficult (compared for example to the recent success of the Liberal Democrats in the so-called 'blue wall').

A key structural weakness of Reform is its dependence on a single figure, in Nigel Farage. Should he for any reason depart (for example due to ill health) or become badly discredited, it would likely dent support for Reform significantly. A risk for Farage in the latter respect could be his close association with Donald Trump, who is not a popular politician among UK voters. When, during the 2024 election campaign, Farage appeared to echo Trump by arguing that the West had provoked the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Reform immediately slipped by several percentage points in the opinion polls. In February 2025, there were signs however that Farage may have learnt from this, when he suggested that Ukraine should become a member of NATO, just days after that had been ruled out by Trump. Farage's record of building strong team of allies around him is also poor, and there is little sign yet of

him assembling a credible imitation of an opposition frontbench, let alone a government in waiting. Given the UK's parliamentary rather than presidential system, this is a key challenge for Farage to overcome. For the Conservatives, hoping that Farage and Reform will run into difficulties does not amount to a political strategy. However, the better Reform performs in the polls the greater scrutiny it will come under, which might provide opportunities for the Conservatives to reassert their standing as the most credible and competent potential party of government on the right. The Conservatives will not be able to outbid Reform on issues such as immigration, but in other areas of public policy—education, healthcare, the economy and so on—they need to rebuild their credibility and reputation for governing competence. In such a scenario it is unlikely Reform would be vanquished, but in key Conservative target seats (for example in the south and east of England) the threat may be contained.

The second conceivable future is that Reform UK supplants the Conservatives as the major party of the right in Britain. This is the clear aim of Nigel Farage, who predicted in December that at the next general election his party would win hundreds of seats (Farage 2024). Statements such as these are in part designed to induce panic among his opponents but also reveal the scale of his personal ambition. By the end of 2024 the political betting markets were pricing this as a serious possibility, with Farage the bookmakers' favourite to be the next Prime Minister. Certainly, if Reform can retain their current level of support—around a quarter of voters—they will win dozens more seats at the next election. If they can push beyond this to more like a third of the vote they could, Electoral Calculus (2024) suggest, win hundreds of seats. While such a dramatic realignment is highly unusual in a first-past-the-post electoral system, the fragmentation of the party system and a volatile electorate make it a real possibility. The 1993 federal elections in Canada, when the governing Progressive Conservatives (PC) were reduced to just two seats as their vote share collapsed from 43% to 16%, serves as a warning from history for their British counterparts. Although that election was won by the Liberal Party, the Canadian Reform Party established itself as the main right-wing alternative and eventually, after a campaign to 'unite the right', merged with remnants of PC to form the populist Conservative Party of Canada (CPC). Nigel Farage has on numerous occasions noted this story is the model for his strategy.

Rising support for Reform will serve to increase the pressure on Kemi Badenoch to compete with Farage for the populist conservative mantle, taking a tough line on immigration, membership of the ECHR, and net zero. More Trumpian attacks on the judiciary, civil service, regulatory bodies, the BBC, and universities are likely to emanate from the Conservatives as well as Reform as they are sucked further into a vortex of populist one-upmanship. This dynamic will further unmoor the Conservative Party from its more traditional statecraft approach, in a continuation of the trend seem over the past decade (Hayton 2024). The clear risk for the Conservatives now is that they will not be able to out-Farage Farage and will simultaneously raise the salience of Reform's messaging and repel more centrist voters. Nonetheless the obstacles to Reform wholly marginalising the Conservatives are immense, given they start from a much larger parliamentary base and with a swing of only a three percentage points in their favour could capture around another 70 seats at the next election.

Much of the discussion on the right over the coming years is therefore likely to focus on the third possible future, that is whether an electoral pact of some sort should be forged. A merger into single party (the Reformist Conservatives?) is highly unlikely, given the personal animosity between some of the leading players, but an agreement to stand down in certain target seats at the next election seems much more plausible. Analysis of the 2024 general election result indicates a deepening of support for Reform in more working-class constituencies to higher levels than that achieved previously by UKIP (Heath et al. 2025, p. 98), lending some logic to the Conservatives standing down, for example, in the 98 seats where Reform finished second in 2024, in return for a similar agreement in Conservative targets. Of those 98 seats where Reform was the runner up, 80 are held by Labour, 60 are in the north of England and 13 are in Wales (Stewart 2024). This profile lends itself towards a rough demarcation of Reform's resources in the 'red wall' and Conservative energies in the 'blue wall', in an attempt to reverse the long-term trend of declining middle-class support for the Tories (Dorey 2025). An agreement to co-operate is not without electoral risk for both parties, and will provide Labour with the Cameron-esque attack line from 2015 that a vote for either will lead to a 'coalition of chaos'. Nonetheless, if both parties approach the next general election polling in the 20–30 percent range (so collectively well ahead of Labour) an arrangement of some sorts is likely to emerge, even if it only covers some seats and is presented informally.

Finally, the fourth scenario noted above is the possibility of support for both the Conservatives and Reform stabilising at comparable levels (likely each polling in the low/mid-20s) and both parties continuing to compete fiercely with each other. After less than six months in post Kemi Badenoch's position as party leader already looks somewhat precarious, with her defeated rival Robert Jenrick effectively continuing his campaign for the party leadership from the shadow cabinet. To head off a challenge from Jenrick over the coming months and years, Badenoch will need to steady her party's poll rating so that it is competitive with Reform UK. Her strategy for doing so appears to be to attempt to blunt some of Reform's appeal by modifying her party's stance on net zero, immigration, and 'woke' issues, while rebuilding the Conservatives' reputation as the most credible alternative to Labour on mainstream issues such as the economy, welfare reform, and public services. For Badenoch, a key disincentive to a pact with Reform is that the price for any post-election deal would most likely be that Nigel Farage become Prime Minister. In an interview to mark 100 days of her leadership, she argued that:

> I have been given something very precious. I am the custodian of an institution that has existed for nigh-on 200 years. We have no guaranteed right to exist. There is no guarantee that we will be in government. But I have to look after this thing. I can't just treat it like it's a toy and have pacts and mergers. (Badenoch, quoted in *Daily Telegraph* 2025).

However, if that picture persists in the polls as the general election homes into view the pressure for a pact or merger will only intensify. Dozens of Conservative MPs will fear for their seats if the Reform vote advances in their constituencies (of the top 50 target seats for Reform, 23 are held by Conservatives). Many more

Conservative prospective parliamentary candidates will argue that their chances of winning seats would be greatly enhanced by a pact with Reform. In April 2025, Jenrick voiced this concern, and advocated a strategy of uniting the right to avoid it:

> And then you head towards the general election, where the nightmare scenario is that Keir Starmer sails in through the middle as a result of the two parties being disunited. I don't know about you, but I'm not prepared for that to happen. I want the fight to be united. And so, one way or another, I'm determined to do that and to bring this coalition together. (Jenrick, quoted in Elgot and Courea 2025).

A divide is consequently opening up within the Conservative ranks between those who favour some form of co-operation with Reform to unite the right, and those who oppose it, whether that be for strategic or ideological reasons. If Badenoch continues to resist the idea but is unable to advance the Conservatives ahead of their rivals in the polls her tenure as party leader will likely be in peril.

Conclusion

The historic success of the Conservative Party has been built on its capacity to monopolise the right of British politics and prevent challengers from becoming established. It has in the past seen off and marginalised various far-right movements including the British Union of Fascists and the National Front. On occasion, it has also 'been willing to adopt the language—if not policies—of its opponents to close off their political space' (Kowol 2025, p. 136). As such, the populist rhetoric that has been a prominent feature of Conservative Party politics in recent years is not a novel development, just a much more prevalent one. Far from seeing off the populist challenge, the Conservative Party in 2025 finds itself trailing its radical right rival in the polls and struggling to resist the populist ratchet, as the dynamic of party competition on the right is being framed and conducted within the parameters of populist conservatism. The challenge facing Kemi Badenoch is therefore immense: not only must she muster her party after a crushing defeat to offer credible opposition to the government, but she must also confront Reform UK as it threatens to seize the mantle of the leading political force on the right.

Elsewhere in this special issue, Bartle and Allen (2025) argue that the electorate responds 'thermostatically' in the opposite direction to government policy. As such, they anticipate that a period of higher state spending and taxation under Labour will lead to a rightward shift by the electorate. This raises the question not only of which party of the right will be best able to present itself as the most credible opposition to the government to capitalize on this movement, but also whether a generalised swing to the right in electoral preferences will occur, or whether this will be disaggregated into particular salient issue areas. For example, Nigel Farage has suggested that net zero 'could be the next Brexit, where parliament is so hopelessly out of touch with the country' (quoted in Behr, 2025) and therefore views it as ripe for populist exploitation. In his recent calls for British Steel to be nationalised, the Reform leader combined a tilt to the left on economic policy in terms of state

intervention with his call for the net zero climate target to be abandoned. Economic protectionism in terms of strategic industries can also be defended from the right on national security and sovereignty grounds. A rightward shift in the electorate's preferences might not therefore simply take the form of a desire for less government, and could imply strengthening state power in some areas.

This article has argued that the right of British politics is now dominated by populist conservatism, and that the symbiotic relationship between the Conservative Party and Reform UK underpins this ideological outlook. This populist conservatism is concomitant with the transnational national conservatism movement that has garnered prominence in recent years, but it is also a distinctively British phenomenon with its roots and development decisively shaped by the electoral competition on the right in the UK over several decades. In his 1995 essay 'The Crisis of Conservatism' Andrew Gamble observed that despite the travails of the Conservative Party at that time, 'the passion and conviction in British politics is still mostly on the Right' and warned that should 'the Centre–Left parties miss this opportunity to reshape the British state, they may find that the future belongs to a new and reinvigorated populist Conservatism' (Gamble 1995, p. 4). Although the Conservative Party finds itself in a perilous electoral position, much the same might be said today, as the government of Keir Starmer struggles to assert itself despite its large majority. However, whether it will be the Conservatives, Reform UK, or an amalgamation of the two that can decisively shape that future remains to be seen.

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