

Whatever happened to the strange death of Tory England?

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*With more than 50 per cent of the popular vote in the general election going to parties on the right of the political spectrum, the intriguing question is whether Britain in 2015, or to be more precise England, has become increasingly conservative in outlook? **Dave Richards** and **Martin Smith** explore this questions and the challenges facing all the political parties.*

In 2005, the political journalist Geoffrey Wheatcroft wrote a critique of the Conservative Party, *The Strange Death of Tory England*. At the time, the Party was yet to come to terms with the legacy of Thatcherism and the rise of New Labour. Wheatcroft reflected on why the Conservatives, who had been the most potent force in British politics for the previous 120 years, were in danger of imploding. Uncertainty and squabbling over its ideological identity, manifested in the regicide of three Party leaders in less than eight years, led him to conclude the Party was doomed, like the Liberals before it, to political oblivion. Yet, in the same year David Cameron was anointed, rather than the potentially more [ideologically] divisive David Davis, as Party leader.



Fast-forward to the present and the tectonic plates of British politics have shifted. Having heard Liberal voices around the Cabinet table for the first time in three generations, the Liberal-Democratic Party is now embroiled in its own existential crisis. In the aftermath of Ed Miliband's failed bid for Number 10, the same may also be said of the Labour Party as it enters into one of its periodic bouts of recrimination, dressed-up as revisionism. Of course, what is also striking is that Wheatcroft's prediction of the death of Tory England has been greatly exaggerated. Prior to the May 8th, none of the main polling forecasters were predicting that more than 50 per cent of the popular vote (Cons, UKIP, DUP etc.) would have gone to parties ostensibly on the centre right of British politics.



It is worth highlighting that prior to the election one of the most pressing questions confronting David Cameron's Conservative Party was where it would turn, to try and secure some form of viable minority or coalition government? The momentum appeared to be on the centre-left of British politics, evidenced by: the rise of the Green Party, the SNP, Plaid Cymru; the growing pressure from grass-root members of the Liberal-Democratic Party to return the Party to a more social-democratic set of traditions; and, some partial ground gained by Ed Miliband's Labour Party since its defeat in 2010. Yet, on election night itself, the elusive 'middle-ground' of British politics appears to have discernibly alighted upon right facing terra firma.

The intriguing question is whether Britain in 2015, or to be more precise England, has become increasingly conservative in outlook? Alternatively, was it the fear of the other, a perception of the potential for anti-austerity profligacy and the threat of the SNP (a constant Conservative refrain throughout the general election) which won out the day?

The Conservative back-bencher [Jacob Rees-Mogg's response](#) to UKIP's break-through in the 2013 local elections was thought-provoking. He claimed that UKIP's rise should be welcomed as demonstrable evidence that the ideological compass in Britain was vacillating in an increasingly centre-right direction. Elsewhere, [Ford and Goodwin](#) have made the case that UKIP has garnered a large swathe of support from disillusioned Labour supporters, euphemistically referred to as the 'Left Behind'. These voters are portrayed as older, less well-educated and male, who feel a sense of alienation in the face of such forces as globalisation and adaptation to a post-industrial economy. In turn, [Ford has gone on to argue](#) in his analysis of the Labour vote that the Party was more likely to gain support from the 'young, ethnically diverse, highly educated, socially liberal [and] large public sector'. The politics of fear seems to have been at play in driving former Labour supporters into what they perceived to be the safer sanctuary offered by the politics of UKIP.

What is clear from this election is that the two main centre-left parties Labour and the Liberal Democrats have been seriously, if not mortally wounded. The Liberal Democrats have lost the non-conformist vote. In the past it was the home of the protest, anti-Westminster and anti-political elite voter. The responsibility of office has destroyed that selling point and their supporters seem to have distributed their favours across a wide range of parties. It is difficult to see what identity they can develop in order to re-establish their role as a major party. There is a real danger that the Liberals have lost their position as the third party permanently. In 2015 they had 66 second places compared to UKIP's 125.

Labour's position is equally precarious. As John Curtice has said, without Scotland Labour needs a 12 per cent swing to win the 2020 election. A big question for Labour is how they can win back Scotland at the same time as winning back traditional supporters in the Midlands, East and South of England? Fundamentally Labour's social democracy has been hollowed out. Rather than Labour being the party of a national working class it has become a party of a regional, collectivist working class in the North and a metropolitan professional class elsewhere. Labour's economic strategy both in government and in the election seems to have limited resonance with voters and much of the post-war welfare state may well have been radically changed or eliminated by 2020. Labour, and it is clear from the early stages of the leadership contest, has a great difficulty in defining a 21st century centre-left position that can pull together the coalition of voters it needs to win. It is a challenge, as [John Harris](#) points out, that similar parties elsewhere in Northern Europe are confronting: 'No senior Labour figure...has yet mentioned an ongoing crisis of European social democracy, embodied by François Hollande's torrid experience of power, [big problems for the centre-left in Scandinavia, and the dire position of the German SPD.](#)'

This is not to say the right are without problems. The Conservatives seemed to have resigned themselves to being the English, rather than the Unionist, party. The question is how can they retain legitimacy to govern the whole country when they have so little support in the wider UK. At the same time UKIP seem to have been cursed by their apparent success. The party is also soul searching. The personal attacks between leading figures covers a clash between those who want to shift UKIP to the mainstream to capitalise on their success and those who want to retain its right-wing, populist identity.

Of course, [as we have argued elsewhere](#), the problem in all these machinations is that the parties are continuing to conduct politics amongst themselves, focusing on short-term tactics and forgetting their relationship with the people who matter: voters.

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