



# 'Things Fall Apart, the Centre-Right Cannot Hold': the crises of British Conservatism since 1990

Peter Dorey<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The Conservative Party's victory in the 2019 general election was mainly due to specific short-term factors that masked the long-term problems bequeathed by decades of Thatcherite radicalism. Since the 1980s, Conservative governments, in thrall to neoliberalism and 'the market', have pursued a relentless unconservative assault on Britain's civic institutions and increased anxiety, insecurity, and precarity among much of the middle-class. Far from abating following Margaret Thatcher's resignation in November 1990, when her successor, John Major pledged to create a nation 'at ease with itself', this article argues that Thatcherism and neoliberalism have become ever more entrenched among Conservative MPs, such that the Party today appears to be more Thatcherite than ever before, especially on economic and European issues, but also on sundry socio-cultural issues. Thus did the 2024 general election highlight the crumbling of the Conservatives' so-called Blue Wall, with the Party's support from the middle-class much reduced compared to the 1960s; a long-term trend of class dealignment matching the Labour Party's loss of former working-class electoral support. This significant diminution of middle-class Conservative support has been compounded by a growing number of more socially liberal or Left-leaning, working-from-home, young professionals moving to cheaper retirement or satellite towns, and thus altering their political complexion. Moreover, tactical voting or 'vote swapping' are becoming more organised, aided by technology and social media. In tandem with this, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats have unofficially or informally been engaging in local electoral pacts to maximise the anti-Conservative vote in key or marginal constituencies. The Conservatives' electoral decline has recently been compounded by the rise of Reform UK on the authoritarian populist Right.

**Keywords** Authoritarian populism/populist · Civic institutions · Conservative Party · Conservatism · Middle-class · Neoliberalism · Thatcherism

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✉ Peter Dorey  
dorey@cardiff.ac.uk

<sup>1</sup> Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK



With the notable exception of 2019—which itself was an exceptional election due to the unique issue and personalities involved—the Conservatives have struggled electorally since the landslide victories of the 1980s. Only in 1992 and 2015 did the erstwhile ‘natural party of government’ win a general election outright, and on both occasions, these were by small parliamentary majorities, while in 2010 and 2017, the Party was only able to govern via a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, and a parliamentary pact with the DUP, respectively. In 2024, the Conservatives suffered their worst ever general election defeat, their tally of parliamentary seats considerably lower than the 156 they won back in 1906. Having won 14 million votes in 2019, many of these from working-class voters, the Conservatives slumped to less than seven million votes 5 years later, haemorrhaging some former support to Labour and the Liberal Democrats to the centre or centre-Left, and even more votes to Reform UK to the Right.

This has confronted the Conservative Party with an existential dilemma over its political purpose and future; what, and who, do the Conservatives now represent in the twenty-first century. This is particularly acute as the failures and problems of decades of triumphalist neoliberalism and globalisation become ever more apparent, and detrimentally affect increasing numbers of British citizens, particularly swathes of the erstwhile Conservative middle-class.

This article identifies several developments and trends which illustrate the sources and scale of the long-term or structural problems facing contemporary British Conservatism and the Conservative Party. First is the entrenched subservience to Thatcherism, from which many Conservatives seem unable or unwilling to unshackle themselves. Indeed, most Conservative MPs now seem to view Thatcher(ism) as their lodestar, their one fixed point of reference in an increasingly unstable neoliberal world—one which they have been instrumental in establishing and then entrenching. Hence, we contend that the Conservative Party has undergone a process of ‘Thatcherisation’, whereby it has become overwhelmingly and instinctively Thatcherite ideologically, as evinced by its responses and proposed solutions to issues and problems pertaining to economic affairs, Europe, public sector reform, trade unionism, and welfare provision. For most Conservatives, the assumption is not that Thatcherism has failed, or is no longer relevant to the socio-economic problems of the twenty-first century, but that Thatcherite policies either require more time to become fully effective, or need to be enacted with renewed vigour, and with sources of opposition or resistance conquered. This ‘Thatcherisation’ of the Conservative Party has been reinforced by the Thatcherite ideological views and perspectives entrenched among an increasing number of the Party’s MPs since their eponymous hero’s resignation in 1990; each electoral intake of Conservative MPs has strengthened the number and influence of Thatcherites in the parliamentary Party, while the numerical and political strength of the One Nation Tories has diminished accordingly.

Second, the ‘Thatcherised’ Conservative Party has waged an increasingly aggressive ideological war against established civic, political, and social institutions; entities which Conservatives previously venerated, both as repositories of accumulated intergenerational wisdom, and as intermediate institutions which reflected and reinforced the organic unity and interdependence of society.



Third, the socially debilitating and destabilising consequences of relentless neo-liberalism, and individualism. Whereas British Conservatism previously cherished continuity, security, stability, and tradition, the Thatcherised Conservative Party has rejected these in favour of constant competition, relentless reforms (in the guise of modernisation), and flexibility *vis-à-vis* the needs of 'the market' or employers, in accordance with supply-side economics. However, these have resulted in increasing insecurity and precarity for growing numbers of ordinary working people, many of them in hitherto 'safe' or 'solid' middle-class occupations and prestigious professions, and from which the Conservative Party hitherto attracted most of its electoral support.

Fourth, the Conservative Party has—in a manner redolent of Old Labour—succumbed to bitter factionalism and infighting over ideological identity and purity, and *inter alia* its stance on specific issues and policies, coupled with sundry accusations of leadership betrayal. These, in turn, have yielded increased cross-voting and back-bench rebellions in parliamentary Divisions. All of this has destroyed the Conservative Party's former reputation for cohesion, deference, and loyalty to its leaders, relative public unity, and statecraft (for example, see Hayton 2024).

Fifth, and finally, the Conservative Party is being weakened by demographic and concomitant electoral changes, these largely deriving from neoliberalism, globalisation, and technological developments. These include the aforementioned growing insecurity and precarity of the established middle-class, and the extent to which many younger professionals and graduates who, having been priced-out of London and other increasingly expensive cities, have moved to slightly cheaper coastal or 'satellite' towns—facilitated by the post-Covid trend towards working-from-home—resulting in changes in the electoral dynamics and political complexions of many hitherto Conservative constituencies in southern England.

## The Conservative Party and 'Thatcherisation'

Since the 1990s, the Conservative Party has been unwilling to 'move on' intellectually and ideologically from Thatcherism. In this respect, its mindset is marooned in the 1980s. This is deeply problematic for three reasons. First, one of the strengths of the pre-Thatcher Conservative Party was precisely its avowed rejection of ideology, by which it meant principles and policies derived from abstract ideas and theoretical blueprints for political change or radical socio-economic reconstruction. Instead, Conservatives were proudly pragmatic, governing according to circumstances, and utilising accumulated wisdom. They were concerned to tackle problems as and when they arose, rather than create society anew based on some naïve utopian plan or vision extrapolated from political doctrines.

Thus, did Ian Gilmour argue that Conservatism was characterised by 'scepticism, a sense of the limitations of human reason, a rejection of abstraction or abstract doctrines, a distrust of systems and a belief instead in the importance of experience and of "circumstance"' (Gilmour 1983: 95; see also Gilmour 1978: 109–120, 144–71; Norton and Aughey 1981: chapter one; Oakeshott 1962: 127; Patten 1983: chapter



one). Or as Lord Salisbury once observed: ‘A gram of experience is worth a ton of theory’ (quoted in Pinto-Duschinsky 1967: 51).

Having hitherto rejected text-book theories as the basis of political programs, a growing number of post-1970s British Conservatives became deeply enamoured with the ideas of Milton Friedman, Friedrich Hayek—although Hayek (1960: 397–411) famously insisted that he was a Liberal, not a Conservative—and Adam Smith. Initially, this proved electorally successful, as millions of British people in the 1980s welcomed tax cuts, statutory limits on trade unions, the right-to-buy (council houses), restrictions on allegedly profligate (usually Labour-controlled) local authorities, privatisation and the creation of a ‘share-owning democracy’, curbs on welfare provision to target ‘scroungers’, and a purported ‘rolling back’ of the State in favour of individual liberty and ‘the market’. People were thus recast as consumers rather than citizens; economic agents instead of social beings.

However, instead of Thatcherism dissipating and declining since Margaret Thatcher’s 1990 resignation, and her death in 2013, subsequent general elections have witnessed an increase in the number or proportion of Conservative parliamentarians who profess to subscribe to Thatcherite views and values, especially on economic and European issues, but also on many social and cultural matters. Indeed, many of them will have been adopted as parliamentary candidates in large part because of their professed adherence to Thatcherism. For example, Heppell shows that whereas the balance between Thatcherites and One Nation Tories among Conservative MPs in 1997 was 56.8% and 24.5%, respectively (the remainder being ‘agnostic’ or ideologically ambiguous), by 2010, the corresponding figures were 81% to 13.5% (Heppell 2013, 2020; Heppell and Hill 2009).

Instead of reverting to a moderate centre-Right or One Nation stance after Thatcher’s defenestration in November 1990, the Conservative Party continued moving to the Right, such that the response of many, if not most, of the Party’s MPs to any electoral defeat (including that of 2024) is that they should have pursued Thatcherism and concomitant radical policies with more conviction and vigour. The pre-Thatcherite, avowedly non-ideological, One Nation Conservatives have correspondingly declined inexorably, both in number and influence (see, for example, Dorey 2023a, b: chapter 5; Dorey and Garnett 2015; McKibbin 1998). Thatcherism has therefore become hegemonic in the twenty-first century Conservative Party, which is why we refer to its ‘Thatcherisation’. Thatcherism has become entrenched both in a clear majority of Conservative MPs, and thus within the Party *qua* institution.

Moreover, even the dwindling coterie of One Nation Conservatives, such as Theresa May, generally subscribe to a weaker version of One Nation Toryism than their 1950s and 1960s predecessors, reflecting the economic, institutional, and political changes which Britain has experienced since the 1980s (Dorey 2023b; Hickson et al. 2022). Their diminishing ranks were further depleted by expulsion, voluntary departure, or defection from the Conservative Party during Boris Johnson’s premiership; for example, Heidi Allen, Nick Boles, David Gauke, Justine Greening, Amber Rudd, Anna Soubry, and Sarah Wollaston (Self 2023). Meanwhile, another prominent One Nation Conservative (indeed, chair of the One Nation parliamentary caucus), Damian Green, failed to secure adoption as the Party’s candidate for the new Weald



of Kent constituency in 2024, having served as Conservative MP for Ashford (Kent) since 1997.

Certainly, on economic issues, neoliberalism is more deeply entrenched than ever before among Conservative MPs, while many of them are also strongly Eurosceptic, and socially conservative or authoritarian: freedom and choice in the economic realm, discipline, and conformity in the social and cultural spheres (on the entrenchment of neoliberalism, see Dorey 2022). Hence, Andrew Gamble's (1988) characterisation of Thatcherism as the free economy and the strong state. This means that the instinctive response of most Conservative MPs to almost any economic problem is to urge yet more privatisation, more deregulation, more competition, more tax cuts, and more curbs on trade unions and workers' rights to enhance labour market flexibility and strengthen managerial authority.

Similarly, the instinctive reaction of many Conservatives to social problems is simply to demand another tranche of authoritarian populist or punitive curbs and policies *vis-à-vis* asylum seekers, crime, immigration, peaceful demonstrations or rallies, and welfare claimants. This authoritarian populism has also underpinned the demands of many on the Conservative Right that Britain should withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), a stance which is both nationalistic in its eschewal of foreign or international jurisdiction over British law, and also derives from the authoritarian Right's disdain for civil liberties and the concept of social justice.

Thus did five senior Conservatives, including Liz Truss, co-author a 2012 book which urged a renewal of the supposedly successful policies of the 1980s, which had allegedly been diluted or abandoned subsequently by Conservative leaders like John Major and David Cameron. Having denounced British workers for being 'among the worst idlers in the world', the authors urged a reinvigorated Thatcherism, via more deregulation, marketisation (of public services), privatisation, tax cuts (to reward hard work and encourage entrepreneurialism), a more rigorous education system which prioritised purportedly economically relevant subjects and skills (while also instilling a work ethic among pupils and students), and a major overhaul of the welfare state to eradicate growing dependency and instil self-reliance. London would effectively be recast as Singapore-on-Thames. (Kwarteng et al. 2012: 61).

In many respects, Thatcherite Conservatives bear a considerable similarity to their ideological polar opposites, the former Communist rulers of the old Soviet Union, and as such, have repeated many of the same mistakes due to the obstinate faith in the veracity of their ideology and its theoretical underpinnings, and a concomitant refusal to undertake any critical reflection or reconsideration (Innes 2023). Consequently, when the promised socio-economic benefits did not materialise, hubris prevailed over humility; rather than reappraise the ideology and recognise its inherent flaws and impracticability, the response was three-fold. First, any empirical evidence or statistics purporting to highlight the failures of the policies would be denounced as biased (along with those citing the data), inaccurate, politically motivated by 'enemies within', outdated, selective, or otherwise skewed. Second, the respective ideologies and associated policies were deemed to need either more time or/and to be implemented more vigorously; a doubling-down to force them to work. Reality had to be warped to fit the theory.



Third, it was assumed that some of those responsible for implementation were failing to administer the policies with sufficient enthusiasm and effectiveness. It was suspected that heretical and hostile personnel within key governing institutions were sabotaging the practical application of the ideology, and were therefore largely responsible for its consistent failure to deliver the promised utopia. Those deemed responsible for such obstruction or subversion needed to be identified, removed, and replaced by true acolytes and trusted allies who would then implement the ideology and concomitant policies with the requisite zeal.

A relatively recent example is the insistence of Liz Truss (at the Conservative Party' 2022 annual conference) that the economic chaos which followed the radical economic policies of her ultra-short premiership in autumn 2022, particularly as implemented via the mini-Budget of her Chancellor, Kwasi Kwarteng, was not due to inherent defects in the fiscal and monetary measures themselves, but because of deliberate sabotage by an 'anti-growth coalition'. She subsequently widened her attack by claiming that she and Kwarteng had been thwarted by a 'deep state' (a claim that would previously have been associated with the Left when explaining the apparent failure of Labour governments to enact 'true' Socialism). In a February 2024 speech to the new Popular Conservative movement, Truss (quoted in *The Independent*, 21 February 2024) alleged that:

agents [of the Left] are only too active in public and private institutions and what we have come to know as the administrative state and the deep state. I saw this for myself first hand as they sabotaged my efforts in Britain to cut taxes, reduce the size of government and restore democratic accountability.

Yet, because Thatcherite Conservatives insist that many of Britain's economic and social problems are due to the supposedly anti-Capitalist values and Left-leaning personnel of sundry administrative, cultural, and political elites, a plethora of civic institutions, since the 1980s, have been subjected to repeated denigration and reforms by successive Conservative governments, in order to render them compatible and compliant with the radical policies and objectives of Thatcherite Conservatism. Indeed, most civic institutions have endured a permanent revolution in recent decades—the antithesis of 'conservatism'—to the extent that when Conservative Ministers are dissatisfied with the unintended or unforeseen outcomes or consequences of their ideologically driven policies, the instinctive response has been to enact another tranche of modernising institutional reforms, often in the guise of imbuing a business ethos, improving cost-effectiveness, increasing efficiency, or instilling accountability in civic and social institutions.

Although Conservatism has historically accepted that some change is necessary and unavoidable, it has equally insisted that changes should be evolutionary and organic, rather than imposed in accordance with radical schema intended to create a new socio-economic order. Yet, this is precisely the type of change which Thatcherite radicalism has pursued since the 1980s, and whenever these have failed to elicit the desired result, the default response has usually been to double-down on them, by enacting further reforms more vigorously, whilst berating those to whom the initial reforms were applied or targeted for not behaving or responding as required.



In thrall to Thatcherism, few Conservatives have been able or willing to recognise that some of their key policies might themselves be inherently flawed, due to the deficiencies of the ideology on which they are based. Moreover, rather than acknowledge the phenomenon of 'market failure', Thatcherite Conservatives invariably insist that any problems pertaining to 'the market' merely prove the need for more deregulation, economic liberalisation, labour market flexibility, privatisation, tax cuts (for the better-off), and weakening of trade unions or employment rights.

## The relentless attack on intermediate institutions

Conservatives have traditionally venerated established civic institutions for three main reasons. First, they enshrined the accumulated experience and wisdom of the past, which was then transmitted to subsequent generations, thereby contributing to overall social stability and continuity. In this regard, Conservatives considered long-standing institutions to represent a vital link between the past, the present, and the future, thereupon ensuring that important values, practices, and traditions endured inter-generationally.

The second reason why Conservatives previously revered established civic institutions was the concomitant notion of society as a complex organic entity, in which the component parts were interlinked and mutually dependent, reflecting a system entailing reciprocal roles and responsibilities between its key institutions and social classes. Third, these organisations constituted '*intermediate* institutions'—what Edmund Burke (1968/1790: 135) termed 'little platoons'—which provided a buffer between the individual and the State, thereby serving to diffuse power which would become dangerous if it was concentrated in the hands of either the people *en masse* (the tyranny of the majority), or one major institution or individual (autocracy). According to Ian Gilmour, a former Conservative Minister, intellectual, and prominent critic of Thatcher(ism): 'It is these buffers between the individual and the State which preserve liberty by preventing a direct confrontation between them. When they are swept away, tyranny or anarchy follows' (Gilmour 1992: 199. See also Gilmour 1978: 64).

For these reasons, non-Thatcherite Conservatives insisted on the need to defend and maintain established institutions, thus arguing that any reforms should be evolutionary and incremental, and ultimately intended to preserve or even strengthen the existing institutions; change in order to conserve. The main threat was always assumed to emanate from the Left, in the guise of a radical Labour government which would supposedly destroy the *ancien regime* to establish Socialism.

Yet, since the 1980s, it has been Thatcherite Conservatives who have evinced increasing hostility to most of Britain's intermediate institutions, either denigrating them for being 'conservative' obstacles to the radical restructuring of Britain via neoliberalism and the marketisation of public services, or claiming that they had been infiltrated and colonised by Marxists or, more recently, 'the Woke' (who are sometimes also denounced as 'cultural Marxists'). This alleged infiltration is attributed to a strategy of subversion to disseminate Left-wing values, promote the



politics of envy against the rich, denigrate Capitalism in general, and, via Woke, zealously promote ‘equality and diversity’ in pursuit of social justice.

Hence, the BBC, Church of England, civil service, educationalists (variously referred to contemptuously as ‘the blob’—**bloated bureaucracy**), the House of Lords, Labour-run local authorities, and universities were—and continue to be—criticised by Thatcherite Conservatives for being anti-business, anti-competition, and anti-enterprise. Thus did Gilmour lament that ‘Thatcherism’s frank hostility to intermediate institutions was another deep break with Conservative tradition’ (Gilmour 1992: 199).

These attacks on civic or intermediate institutions have been intensified since the 2016 Referendum vote to Leave the European Union, which heralded a new wave of Right-wing authoritarian populism in the Conservative Party, especially under (and since) Boris Johnson’s leadership (on this new wave of Conservative/Right-wing authoritarian populism, see Featherstone, 2022; Greenwood and Twyman 2019; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Ward and Ward 2023). Indeed, some of the aforementioned institutions have been accused of assiduously seeking to sabotage Brexit, to the extent that sundry senior civil servants, judges, and [House of Lords] peers have been denounced as ‘enemies of the people’ (see, for example, *The Daily Mail* 4 November 2016; *The Daily Mail* 19 April 2017; *The Daily Express*, 22 January 2020).

This further exemplified how far and how deep the legacy and psyche of Thatcherism has become ingrained among many Conservatives, who now attack established or intermediate institutions on a regular basis. This has manifested itself in the Conservatives’ promotion of post-Brexit ‘culture wars’, and the extent to which non-Conservative individuals, institutions, and social movements have routinely been denounced as ‘Woke’ to discredit and delegitimise them (Dorey 2025). Moreover, Woke and Left-wing/Marxist/cultural Marxist are often treated as interchangeable, and thus depicted as an equal threat to British institutions, traditions, and values.

For example, a former Conservative parliamentary candidate, and now a journalist, has alleged that: ‘The Diversity, Inclusion and Equity (sic) ideology has spread through Britannia’s entire body. This vicious Marxist cancer is now attacking her brains, having debilitated much of her formerly warrior-like frame’. Consequently, he complains, ‘Britain is becoming unrecognisable’ (Story 2024). For similar invective, see: Kemi Badenoch MP, Hansard 2020: col. 1012; Suella Braverman MP, 2022; Miriam Cates MP, quoted in *The Daily Mail* 15 May 2023; Oliver Dowden MP, quoted in Mason 2022; Murray 2021; Robinson 2020; Rishi Sunak MP, quoted in McFadden 2022; Young 2019).

Manufacturing such fear and a siege mentality, and ‘othering’ critics or opponents, is naturally intended to legitimise authoritarian populist responses which seek to curb or regulate the activities and roles of these civic institutions, and of those employed within them (Beckett 2010). In the 1980s, it was mainly local government and the trade unions which were targeted by Thatcherites, but today, by labelling myriad institutions as Woke, the net of the post-Thatcher Conservative Right’s authoritarianism can be cast much wider.

It should briefly be acknowledged, however, that criticisms of Woke, or at least its alleged excesses, are not the sole preserve of the Right. Several liberal or Left





academics and commentators, while fully sharing a commitment to social equality, justice, and 'progressivism', have been concerned that Woke, and its concomitant 'identity politics', risks promoting or privileging 'diversity' in a manner which becomes inimical to the wider (Enlightenment) goals of equality and universalism, while also downplaying or disregarding the disadvantages and hardships suffered by the working-class or 'left-behind' (see Mounk 2023; Neiman 2024). For example, John Gray has argued that: 'Once questions of identity become central in politics', it is assumed that 'conflicts of economic interests can be disregarded'. Consequently, 'identity politics consign to obloquy and oblivion those whose lives are blighted by an economic system that discards them as useless' (Gray 2024: 111). Nonetheless, it remains the Thatcherite/populist Right which has weaponised 'Woke' as a political strategy, applying it almost indiscriminately to any social justice campaign or civic institution it wishes denigrate, discredit, and ultimately delegitimise.

As the prominent non-Thatcherite Conservative, Chris Patten (2018: 145) laments: 'Any regard for the importance of intermediary institutions in society ... was thought a denial of the government's democratic authority'. The institutional checks and balances which have hitherto been deemed integral to a healthy and pluralistic liberal democracy are viewed, by many Thatcherite Conservatives and/or authoritarian populists, as an undemocratic denial of what 'the people' want, as articulated via the ballot box at the last general election or latest referendum. Meanwhile, experts, professionals, and scientists who present empirical counter-arguments and rational logic are often denounced and dismissed as the 'liberal elite'. Like many Right-wing populists today, on the issues they are most concerned about, Thatcherite Conservatives privilege emotions and feelings over evidence and facts, with 'truth' redefined to what they *want* to believe; a wholly subjective reality established and sustained via particular discourses which are difficult for critics to challenge, precisely because discourses, and their adherents, construct their own meanings and 'regimes of truth' (Bourdieu 1990; Foucault 1980: 131, 201; Hall 1992: 293–295).

## **The socially destabilising consequences and impact of Thatcherite Conservatism**

The relentless commercialisation, competition, and consumerism pursued by Thatcherite Conservatives since the 1980s have destabilised, if not destroyed, much else that traditional Conservatives venerated. As John Gray, noted in the mid-1990s, the Thatcherite revolution grievously undermined authority, continuity, established communities, order, stability, and wisdom based on experience accrued over generations. The deification of 'the market' reduced human relations to the cash nexus (just as Marx had envisaged), such that people's interactions became transactional, citizens were transformed into consumers, economic rights superseded social responsibilities, and monetary gain transcended morality (Gray 1994: 19, 20, 22).

Certainly, Gray has highlighted how key aspects of Thatcherism have seriously weakened the sense of community and organic unity that pre-Thatcherite Conservatism revered: 'the mobility of labour required ... in a society dominated by



unconstrained market institutions, is profoundly disruptive of settled communities', while also promoting 'a cult of mobility that consort badly with the settled communities cherished by traditional conservatives'. Ultimately, the practical consequence of 'market liberalism is ... ineluctably destructive of tradition and community', and 'inimical to the values that traditional conservatives hold dear'. In a society dominated by unrestrained individualism and neoliberalism, and in thrall to the inviolable and insatiable needs of the market: 'Status is ephemeral, trust frail, and contract sovereign' (Gray 1994: 19, 20, 22). Continuity, cohesion, and community are eviscerated, sacrificed on the altar of maximising profits and shareholder-value, whereupon an increasing number of individuals experience feelings of anomie, alienation, and disempowerment, coupled with a greater susceptibility to mental health problems (Becker et al. 2021; Cain 2018). As the article reveals below, in the context of profound demographic and electoral changes this destabilisation has begun to fracture the Conservative Party's traditional electoral coalition. Sections of the middle-class have concluded that the Conservatives have abandoned them to the needs and vagaries of 'the market', with its innate instability, lack of security, and short-termism.

### **Increased infighting, disloyalty, and factionalism**

Prior to Thatcherism, the Conservative Party had enjoyed a renowned reputation for internal cohesion and unity, and public loyalty to its leaders, such that occasional intra-party disagreements were largely kept hidden from the public. In this regard, the Conservatives were generally deemed much less susceptible (than the Labour Party) to debilitating and electorally damaging public intra-party disagreements over ideological trajectory and policies, or trenchant allegations of leadership betrayal. This, of course, was a major reason why the Conservatives enjoyed a reputation for effective 'statecraft', which Jim Bulpitt famously attributed to the Party's propensity for strong and stable party management, success in devising winning electoral strategies', regularly establishing hegemony in the realm of political agenda-setting, problem-definition, and setting the terms of debate, while also maintaining a reputation for competent and effective government (Bulpitt 1986. See also Gamble 1988: 141; Hayton 2021: Stevens, 2020).

The relatively recent decline of Conservative Party unity and cohesion can be discerned in three main ways, albeit often interlinked, over-lapping, and mutually reinforcing: (i) more—and more visible—intra-party arguments over ideological trajectory and purity, coupled with concomitant policy preferences; (ii) a plethora of relatively new factions and groups in the Conservative Party, which both reflect and reinforce the greater ideological divisions and arguments over policies, and which sometimes attract more allegiance or loyalty than the wider party or its incumbent leader; and (iii) greater disloyalty to the leadership, both via more backbench rebellions in parliamentary Divisions, and public criticism by disaffected Party colleagues or members.



## Intra-party arguments and ideological infighting

It might have been expected that the Thatcherisation of the Conservative Party would yield greater cohesion and unity, as the former division between Thatcherites and One Nation Tories was increasingly superseded. Yet, whereas this was the main division during John Major's premiership, reinforced by the growing divisions between pro-Europeans and Eurosceptics which broadly reflected the orthodox Left–Right ideological schism, the Conservative Party subsequently has been characterised by increasing conflicts between, and among, self-confessed Thatcherites, due to fears and suspicions that the professed commitment to Thatcherism is not being adhered to with sufficient conviction and consistency.

Again, the Conservative Right has increasingly mirrored the old Marxist Left in its internecine infighting over ideological (Thatcherite) purity, and allegations or suspicions that some of their colleagues are insufficiently committed or consistent, and therefore are susceptible to backtracking or diluting Thatcherism (think of Monty Python's sketch in which The People's Front of Judea argue with The Judean People's Front!). While these intra-Thatcherite conflicts have sometimes been partly conducted via the prism of Brexit, they also manifested themselves in bitter disagreements over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021. For example, some Conservative MPs endorsed the greatly increased State intervention and surveillance enacted during lockdowns, and the payment of furlough subsidies to firms which were forced temporarily to cease trading, on the grounds that the exceptional circumstances and risks to life warranted a short-term suspension of neoliberalism. This, however, was viewed wholly as a temporary response to an urgent and wholly unforeseen public health crisis, not as the prelude or precursor to any abandonment of the overall commitment to neoliberalism, and the continued pursuit of Thatcherism.

However, others on the Thatcherite Right remained deeply sceptical about the necessity or wisdom of allegedly draconian curbs on individual freedom during Covid, and variously argued that the enforced, but temporary, closure of businesses was likely to prove more damaging economically, in the medium to longer term, than Covid itself. Thus did 63 Conservative MPs write to the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in early 2021, demanding that all Covid lockdowns and restrictions be lifted by April 2021, by which time all citizens over the age of 50 were scheduled to have been vaccinated; these MPs argued that: 'The burden is on ministers to demonstrate the evidence of effectiveness and proportionality with a *cost–benefit* analysis for each restriction' (*The Guardian* 13 February 2021, emphasis added). In effect, many Thatcherite Conservatives viewed their Government's response to Covid, via lockdowns, temporary closures of business, and furlough schemes, wholly in terms of the likely economic costs and consequences, rather than from a public health perspective, and the number of human lives saved.

More generally—and redolent historically of the Labour Left—avowedly Thatcherite Conservative MPs and peers have variously queried the ideological purity or reliability of some of their parliamentary colleagues. Suspicions of betrayal or backsliding are rife, with the staunchest Thatcherites tacitly invoking Thatcher's own loyalty test—'Is s/he one of us?'. Rishi Sunak especially was criticised by some



Conservatives for diluting or abandoning Thatcherism, even though he proudly proclaimed his Thatcherite credentials when standing as a leadership candidate to succeed Boris Johnson. This was because Sunak presided over unusually high levels of government borrowing, public spending, and taxation, which his intra-party critics deem to be a clear abandonment of Thatcherism.

Sunak's defence was that the cumulative and combined impact of Covid, the Russo-Ukraine war, and a surge in inflation, had compelled the Conservative Government to increase borrowing, spending, and taxation, but again purely as a short-term pragmatic response to exceptional, indeed, unforeseen, circumstances beyond Ministerial control. He was adamant that: 'My values are Thatcherite. I believe in hard work, family and integrity. I am a Thatcherite ... and I will govern as a Thatcherite' (*The Financial Times* 21 July 2022. See also Sunak quoted in *The Financial Times* 14 December 2023). In the meantime, Sunak sought to ingratiate himself with the Thatcherite Right by joining in the Party's 'culture war' attacks on 'Woke', while also pledging crackdowns on immigration and asylum seekers crossing the English Channel, and denouncing the Labour Party's proposed interventionist economic policies and likely higher public spending.

However, Sunak's defence of his economic record failed to assuage some of his more implacable Thatcherite critics, with the Conservative peer and major donor, Lord (Peter) Cruddas, accusing him of dragging the Party leftwards, to the extent that it had ceased even to be a centre-Right party. On the contrary, Cruddas alleged, what was occurring under Sunak's leadership was 'a coup and a hijacking of the Conservative party by centre-left leaning people' (*The Guardian* 17 December 2022). Meanwhile, Sunak's predecessor, Liz Truss, claims that since she was first elected as a Conservative MP (in 2010), there has been a continued shift to the Left in the Party, such that many of its MPs are 'shapeshifters ... conservatives in name only (CINOs)', who seem to be 'engaged in appeasing the left' *vis-à-vis* their conciliatory or supposedly progressive stance on major issues such as climate change/net zero, Europe, higher taxes, inequality, public health paternalism/nanny state, sexual identity, welfare dependency, and Wokeism (Truss 2024: 189–193).

## New factions and groups

The Conservative Party, like its Labour counterpart, has always enshrined sundry groups of an ideological character, most notably the Monday Club, the Selsdon Group, and the No Turning Back Group, on the Right of the Party, and the (One Nation) Tory Reform Group on the Party's Left. That there were always more groups on the Right of the Conservative Party than its Left reflects the extent to which the former has traditionally been dissatisfied with what it has viewed as the excessive pragmatism, timidity, and consensual centrism of the One Nation Tories who dominated British Conservatism from the 1940s until the 1970s, and who proudly eschewed ideology on the grounds that abstract concepts, intellectual frameworks, and teleological plans were inherently unconservative. This was another major reason why Ian Gilmour insisted that Thatcherism was incompatible with true Conservatism (Gilmour 1992).



It might therefore be assumed that the post-1980s hegemony of Thatcherism in the Conservative Party would have yielded an abatement of Right-wing factionalism, and instead a stronger degree of unity and shared purpose. Instead, paradoxically, the increased entrenchment of Thatcherism in the Conservative Party has spawned a plethora of new factions and groupings on the Right, to maintain the momentum for economically liberal, socially authoritarian, and/or populist, policies, and thereby prevent any retrograde retrenchment. These relatively new intra-party ideological groups and factions include Blue Collar Conservatism, the Common Sense Group, the Cornerstone Group, the Covid Recovery Group, the European Research Group, and the Net Zero Group (Walker 2022). Most recent is a group co-founded by Liz Truss following the ignominious end of her short-lived premiership, Popular Conservatism.

For example, since its formation in summer 2020, The Common Sense Group has been active in pursuing the 'culture wars' and, in particular, fighting 'Woke'. Claiming the involvement of 50 Conservative MPs and peers, it has published a 136-page booklet/manifesto comprising 14 essays (co-)authored by 15 Conservative MPs and three of the Party's peers. The Group's impetus is clearly discernible in the apocalyptic warning from Gareth Bacon MP that:

Britain is under attack. Not in a physical sense, but in a philosophical, ideological and historical sense. Our heritage is under a direct assault—the very sense of what it is to be British has been called into question, institutions have been undermined ... [by] The rise of ... what is a broadly left wing, anti-British, anti-western and anti-capitalist rhetoric, and a domino phenomenon is being witnessed as a succession of national institutions and organisations accept, *seemingly without question or critical analysis*, the new orthodoxy.

(Bacon 2020: 19, emphasis added)

The claim that this development has occurred 'seemingly without question or critical analysis' strongly implies that much of the recent Conservative leadership has been complicit in permitting 'Woke' to become embedded in Britain's civic and political institutions. In this regard, there is a tacit allegation of betrayal of Thatcherism by the Conservative leadership, the implication being that truly Thatcherite senior Conservatives would not have allowed this 'infiltration' to occur. The Common Sense Group therefore sees its role as being to pursue a vigorous counter-attack against 'Wokeism' and 'the emergence of extreme cultural and political groups, Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion', and thereby restore 'authentic conservatism ... nationhood, community, [curbing] migration, the rule of law and public order' (Hayes 2020: 1).

The policies canvassed by the Group are an amalgam of cultural and social conservatism, economic liberalism, nationalism, and authoritarian populism. In true Thatcherite style, it simultaneously promotes more freedom for people in economic affairs and *vis-à-vis* the alleged nanny state, but stronger law-and-order, and also greater State control over what is taught in schools about Britain's culture and history, especially the purportedly civilising, modernising, and wealth-creating aspects of the British Empire. As with Republicans in the United States, a particular target



of the anti-Woke Conservative Right is ‘critical race theory’ (see, for example, Kemi Badenoch MP in Hansard 2020: cols. 1011–1012; Swerling and Turner 2022).

Meanwhile, the Cornerstone Group, established in 2005 by at least 25 Conservative MPs (there is no definitive or official membership list), adopted ‘faith, family, flag’ as its tagline or motto, to emphasise its explicitly socially conservative stance. The Group thus emphasised traditional family values (i.e. heterosexual marriage), nationhood and patriotism, personal responsibility, religious ethics, and social discipline, albeit in tandem with a free-market economy. In so doing, it has been claimed that ‘We [Conservatives] must seize the centre ground and pull it kicking and screaming towards us. That is the only way to demolish the foundations of the liberal establishment’ (quoted in Barrett 2012). The Group’s declared supporters include Conservative MPs such as Bill Cash, Philip Davies, Nadine Dorries, John Hayes, Kwasi Kwarteng, Edward Leigh, John Redwood, and Jacob Rees-Mogg (<https://cornerstonegroup.wordpress.com/about/>). As ever, Conservative advocates of the free-market, competition, and consumerism never seem to acknowledge that neoliberalism and individualism themselves undermine the traditional morality and social cohesion and stability that the Right venerate, and claim to want to restore.

For example, many, if not most, Conservatives would doubtless condemn (as would much of the wider British population) the increased ‘sexualisation’ of British culture, via more sexually explicit films, literature, song lyrics, and television programmes, along with the extent to which advertising often deploys sexual imagery, and the extent to which magazines and newspapers often feature articles about sex. Yet, what these Conservative critics invariably fail to appreciate is that these are a direct consequence of the media recognising that ‘sex sells’; that enough people, as customers, want to purchase such ‘products’, and in so doing, render them profitable or commercially viable. In effect, ‘the market’ and traditional morality—both of which are lauded by Thatcherite Conservatives—are often mutually incompatible; the pursuit of profit invariably transcends traditional sexual propriety.

Several Conservative MPs are members or supporters of, or even actively involved in, more than one of these groups on the Right of the Party, which reflects and reinforces the shared commitment to perpetuating, and even strengthening, Thatcherism, in terms of promoting economic neoliberalism, moral traditionalism, nationalism, populism, and social authoritarianism, whilst eviscerating social liberalism, ‘Wokery’, and the so-called ‘equality and diversity’ industry.

### **Less loyalty to the Conservative leadership**

The plethora of new or relatively recently formed ideological groups and factions in the Conservative Party naturally reflects and reinforces a corresponding degree of internal fragmentation, and the extent to which many Conservative MPs are constantly concerned that the Party’s leadership might be deviating from Thatcherism. Hence, the greater incidence of Conservative backbench rebellions, and consequently the increased difficulties of Party management which leaders such as John Major, David Cameron, Theresa May, and Rishi Sunak experienced. For many Conservative MPs, loyalty to Thatcherism is more important than loyalty to



the Conservative Party if the latter, or its leadership, is judged to be abandoning or diluting Thatcherism. In such instances, it is invariably the Party leader who is deemed to be guilty of betrayal, not 'dissenting' Conservative MPs who defy their leadership in parliamentary Divisions and/or publicly criticise them.

Although intra-party dissent and backbench rebellions (in terms of abstaining, or voting *against* their party, in parliamentary Divisions) were a feature of Edward Heath's (1970–1974) Conservative Government (Norton 1978), such behaviour has increased in scale and frequency since the 1980s. As the Conservative Party has become more Thatcherite since Thatcher's resignation in 1990, so have a growing number of the Party's MPs have felt less obligation to obey the leadership when they perceive the leader *not* to be Thatcherite (or Eurosceptic) enough, either in their overall ideological stance, or on specific policies. Indeed, for the Party's Thatcherites, all Conservative leaders since 1990, with the possible exceptions of Iain Duncan Smith and Michael Howard, have been judged insufficiently Thatcherite. Consequently, many Conservatives on the Party's Right have had few qualms either about publicly criticising their leaders, or withholding their support in parliamentary Divisions.

Of course, what has additionally exacerbated this increase in intra-party dissent are some of the major issues in British politics since the 1990s, and the disagreements these have fostered among Conservative MPs over the Party's policy responses. Obviously, Britain's former membership of the European Union repeatedly divided the Conservative Party from the late 1980s onwards, and was thus a contributory factor in terminating the premierships of Margaret Thatcher, John Major, David Cameron, and Theresa May (Dorey 2017, 2021). However, several other policy issues have also fuelled divisions and backbench rebellions in the Party during the last 15 years, such as COVID lockdowns, House of Lords reform, military intervention in Syria, legalisation of same-sex marriage, and deportation of asylum seekers to Rwanda. Since 2017, over 200 Conservative MPs have voted against their Party, government, and leaders in major Divisions in the House of Commons (BBC News online 2022a. See also Cowley and Norton 1999; Cowley and Stuart 2012; Graham 2014; Hope 2012; Stacey and Adu 2024; Wintour 2010).

This, of course, has in turn further weakened the Conservatives' erstwhile renowned statecraft, both by grievously undermining intra-party cohesion and public unity, and its former reputation for governmental competence. These rebellions also highlight the decline of deference in the Conservative Party, with post-Thatcher leaders often enduring a notable lack of respect from their own backbench MPs, as evinced by more frequent, and overt or public, criticisms or challenges to their authority when taking decisions, or pursuing policies, which are judged, by the Right, to deviate from Thatcherism.

## Demographic and electoral changes

The English middle-class, broadly defined as white-collar, predominantly office-based, administrative, clerical, managerial or/and professional employees (ABs and C1s), and traditionally enjoying higher pay, status, career or promotion prospects,





perks or fringe benefits, and job security (compared to industrial or manual workers), were previously staunch supporters of the Conservative Party; 63% of them voted Conservative back in 1964, whereas only 22% of the middle-class supported Labour (Denver et al. 2012: 67, Table 3.4). By 2017, however, middle-class support for the Conservatives had fallen to 43.5%, while Labour's support among this stratum had risen to 40.5% (YouGov 2017). Put another way, whereas Labour's middle-class support trailed the Conservatives by 41 points in 1964, the gap had fallen to just 3 points in 2017.

In the 2024 general election, Labour's support from the middle-class stood at 36% compared to 22% for the Conservatives, but there are two vitally important caveats. First, the Conservatives lost support to Reform UK on the Right, which attracted 11% of the middle-class vote, meaning that a total of 36% of voters supported the two main Right-wing parties—exactly the number who voted Labour. Second, although Labour's 36% support from the middle-class was 4.5% lower than in 2017, 2024 witnessed a surge in support for other 'progressive' or Left-leaning parties, with the Liberal Democrats attracting 14% of the middle-class vote, and the Green Party 7% (YouGov 2024a).

Several developments have steadily eroded middle-class electoral support for the Conservative Party, many of them partly a long-term consequence of the increasingly detrimental impact of Thatcherism and neoliberalism on white-collar workers. In particular, the 'proletarianisation' of sections of the middle-class, due to workplace restructuring, micro-management, demands for greater 'flexibility', chronic job insecurity or 'precarity', and an intensification or speeding-up of the labour process, has eroded professional autonomy, creativity, discretion, and expertise (see Braverman 1974). Additionally, much of the middle-class has endured stagnant salaries or pay freezes since 2008 in the context of austerity, and attacks on 'unaffordable' or purportedly gold-plated occupational pensions.

Politically, these trends are eroding the Conservative Party's formerly strong support among much of the middle-class, many of whom previously looked to the Conservatives to provide continuity, security, and stability, often as protection from Labour's perceived radicalism. Since the late 1980s, however, the continued hegemony of Thatcherism, and the relentless pursuit of neoliberalism, have alienated some of the middle-class. Conservatism no longer appears capable of (or interested in) providing the stable socio-economic conditions, higher social status, and steadily increasing prosperity which much of the middle-class previously enjoyed, and which was often attributed to the values and competence (statecraft) of the Conservative Party. For example, many of the middle-aged middle-class are witnessing their adult 'children' saddled with £10,000s of graduate debt (for a university education which was previously free), and unable to afford to buy a home of their own, which in turn makes it much more difficult for their offspring to 'settle down' and start a family of their own.

Yet, there is another, more subtle, demographic change occurring which is further eroding the former electoral dominance of the Conservative Party among much of the middle-class, namely geographic population shifts due both to unaffordable house prices, and the increased number of middle-class employees 'working from home' post-COVID.





## The impact of unaffordable house prices

The first of these two trends has become particularly apparent on parts of the Sussex coast near Brighton. The city has become increasingly bohemian, and thus attractive to a predominantly younger, often 'creative' or artistic, cohort, whilst also being famously LGBTQ+ friendly. It is also less than one hour from London by train. Consequently, residential property has become increasingly unaffordable for some first-time buyers, whereupon nearby coastal towns like Bexhill to the east of Brighton, and Hove, Shoreham, and Worthing, to the west, are experiencing an influx of young(er) professionals and families. These towns often had a high elderly population, because they were attractive to many retirees who wanted to spend their twilight years by the seaside. As they have passed away, their homes—often ripe for renovation—have increasingly been bought by young(er) incomers priced-out of nearby Brighton (or London), and who have subsequently precipitated a process of gentrification in these former sedate seaside towns. For example, according to the property company Right Move, the average property price in Brighton during 2023–2024 was £486,443, whereas just 10 miles away, in Worthing, it was £397,290.

The political consequence of this dual process of generational gentrification and 'Brighton over-spill' on the Sussex coast is that the former Conservative hegemony in some of these coastal towns—older people having always been the strongest supporters of the Party—is being weakened (BBC News online 2022b). For example, the formerly safe Conservative seat of Hove (immediately west of Brighton, and now effectively merged with it) elected its first Labour MP in 1997, and remained a Labour seat in 2001 and 2005. Although the Conservatives regained the seat in 2010, they lost it to Labour again in 2015, 2017, and 2019. In 2024, the constituency had been redrawn to become Hove and Portslade, which Labour won, with the Green Party pushing the Conservatives into third place.

Slightly westwards along the coast from Hove, Labour has recently been ending the Conservatives' erstwhile dominance in local elections, winning, for the first time ever, the local council election in Worthing in 2022, and then enjoying victory, also for the first time, in the election for Adur District Council (Shoreham, Lancing and East Worthing), in May 2024. Even more remarkable were Labour's first ever general election victories in East Worthing and Shoreham, and West Worthing, in 2024.

In the opposite direction, Hastings and Rye, in East Sussex, has also seen the Conservative Party's former dominance seriously weakened since the 1980s. In the 1987 general election, the Conservatives won comfortably, polling almost 20,000 votes more than third-placed Labour's paltry 6,800 votes. However, in 1997, 2001, and 2005, Labour won Hastings, and although the seat subsequently returned to the Conservatives, in 2010, 2015, 2017, and 2019, Labour won it again in 2024 by a margin of almost 9000 votes, although the Conservative candidate lost votes to Reform UK.



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## The impact of post-COVID working-from-home

One other trend which is altering the demographics of some erstwhile Conservative retirement or ‘satellite’ towns’ is the recent trend of working-for-home. This was initially a consequence of the 2020–2021 COVID lockdowns, but it has become more permanent or prevalent for some workers. With this ‘remote’ working aided by technological developments, enabling much business and communication to be conducted online, many younger white-collar and/or ‘creative’ workers have found that they can move away from London, or other increasingly ‘unaffordable’ cities, and instead move to coastal or satellite towns where rents and property prices are often somewhat cheaper, and also more likely to be in ‘characterful’, and often more spacious (with a garden), Edwardian or Victorian town-houses and terraces.

A consequence of this is that some previously sedate retirement, or commuter, towns like Buxton, Dartmouth, Folkestone, Margate, Portishead, Reading, and St. Albans, have relatively recently witnessed an influx of young(er), middle-class or white-collar, workers, sundry professionals, and ‘creatives’. This has then established a process whereby new bars, restaurants, and sundry other leisure facilities and cultural amenities, open to cater for this new clientele, thus giving the place a ‘vibe’ or rendering ‘it ‘cool’ or ‘hip’, which then attracts more young professionals and ‘creatives’ (Bloomfield 2024; McVeigh 2015; Toureille 2022; Ward 2022). In response to this trend, it has even been asked (perhaps light-heartedly) whether Worthing ‘could be the new Hackney’ (York 2022).

In some instances, this demographic and socio-economic transformation has yielded a political change, by boosting electoral support for parties other than the Conservatives. For example, in Reading East, the Conservatives’ 6,500 majority over Labour in 2015 was transformed into a near-4,000 majority for Labour in 2017, and then almost 6,000 in 2019. The seat became Reading Central in 2024, which Labour retained. Meanwhile, although Reading West had been held by the Conservatives since 2010, Labour won the seat (now Reading West and mid-Berkshire) in 2024, although the Conservative vote was depleted by the intervention of Reform UK. Elsewhere, in St. Albans, when the Conservatives won the seat in 2005, the Liberal Democrats polled 11,500 votes and finished in third place, but in 2019, they won the seat having polled almost 29,000 votes, a victory (and vote tally) which they repeated in 2024, when the Conservative candidate polled fewer than 10,000 votes.

Obviously, election results are determined by a multitude of variables, but it is evident that in some once safe or solid Conservative parliamentary seats, the above demographic trends are boosting electoral support for Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and/or the Greens (the latter especially in local elections), and thus weakening, or even partially demolishing, the ‘Blue Wall’ in parts of southern England (Dorey 2024).



## Tactical voting and informal vote swapping

Two final developments which are weakening the erstwhile hegemony of the Conservative Party, particularly among the middle-class, in parts of southern England are the increasing phenomenon—and sophistication—of tactical voting, which is developing into modes of ‘vote swapping’, and the emergence of informal local electoral pacts between Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

Although tactical voting per se is not a new phenomenon, digital communication and online campaigns are raising awareness of the electoral dynamics in some ‘marginal’ constituencies, and the extent to which voters who wish to defeat the Conservative candidate need to vote for whoever is most likely to achieve this, even if they do not represent the voter’s preferred political party. In the 2024 general election, YouGov’s pre-election polling revealed that of those who declared Labour to be their first or preferred choice, 29% were intending to vote tactically, while 39% of would-be Liberal Democrats voters intended to do likewise. Of these, 89% of ‘Labour’ tactical voters and 85% of ‘Liberal Democrat’ tactical voters were voting to defeat the Conservatives, usually by voting for each other when this offered the best chance of defeating the Conservative candidate, i.e. would-be Labour voters supporting the local Liberal Democrat candidate, and would-be Liberal Democrat supporters voting Labour (YouGov 2024b).

Such tactical voting has been enhanced by digital communication, whereby information can be disseminated online about which party is best-placed to defeat the Conservatives in marginal constituencies. Indeed, during the last 10 years, designated websites and digital platforms have been established to campaign for tactical voting, and highlight the constituencies where this is likely to have the greatest impact. There are also online ‘vote swapping’ or ‘vote pairing’ campaigns to encourage tactical voting, primarily among Labour and Liberal Democrats supporters, whereby a voter in one constituency agrees to vote tactically for the candidate most likely to defeat the Conservatives, on the basis that another voter in a different marginal seat agrees to do likewise.

One final development which has weakened the Conservatives’ former hegemony in southern England is that of informal pacts between the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats in key constituencies. Although neither party openly admits to endorsing or pursuing these, there were indications, in 2024, that unofficially, the two parties, at least at local level, were agreeing to cooperate by *not* actively or energetically campaigning in a constituency where only the other party is capable of victory. This meant that in some seats where the Liberal Democrats were the only credible challengers to the Conservatives, Labour would not actively or energetically campaign, and the Liberal Democrats would reciprocate by adopting a similarly low-key approach in constituencies where Labour was much more likely to defeat the Conservatives (Blick 2022; Collins 2022; Cunliffe 2024; Gross et al. 2024; Lawson 2022; Parker and Cameron-Chileshe 2022; Penna 2022; Riley-Smith and Boycott-Owens 2022).

As Table 1 illustrates, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats won seats previously held—sometimes throughout the last 100 years or more—by the Conservatives.



**Table 1** Examples of labour and liberal democrats gains from the conservatives in southern England in the 2024 general election

Labour gains	Liberal democrat gains
Aldershot	Cambridgeshire South
Banbury	Cheltenham
Basingstoke	Chesham and Amersham
Camborne and Redruth	Chichester
Cambridgeshire North West	Chippenham
Cornwall South East	Devon South
Dorset South	Didcot & Wantage
Dover & Deal	Eastbourne
Folkestone and Hythe	Eastleigh
Gloucester	Ely and Cambridgeshire East
Hampshire North East	Epsom and Ewell
Hastings and Rye	Frome and Somerset East
Hemel Hempstead	North East Hampshire
Hertfordshire North East	Glastonbury & Somerton
Hitchin	Guildford
Isle of Wight West	Henley & Thame
Milton Keynes Central	Honiton & Sidmouth
Milton Keynes North	Horsham
Portsmouth North	Lewes
Reading West & Mid-Berkshire	Maidenhead
Rochester and Strood	Melksham and Devizes
Somerset North East & Hanham	Mid Sussex
St Austell & Newquay	Newton Abbot
Stevenage	St Ives
Swindon North	Stratford-on-Avon
Swindon South	Taunton & Wellington
Truro & Falmouth	Tiverton & Minehead
Welwyn Hatfield	Torbay
Weston-Super-Mare	Tunbridge Wells
Worcester	Wells & Mendip Hills
Worthing East & Shoreham	Winchester
Worthing West	Wokingham
Wycombe	Yeovil

Source <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2024/uk/constituencies>

In addition to Labour's aforementioned first ever victories in East Worthing and Shoreham, West Worthing, and Weston-Super-Mare, the Party also won erstwhile—often 'safe'—Conservative seats such as Aldershot, Banbury, Basingstoke, City of London and Westminster, Hertfordshire North East, and Wycombe. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats won in erstwhile Conservative



seats such as Chichester, Horsham, Stratford-on-Avon, Tunbridge Wells, and Wokingham.

A further reason why Labour and the Liberal Democrats won so many hitherto Conservative seats in 2024 was that Reform UK attracted the support of many disillusioned ex-Conservative voters. Due to the way that Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system operates, there were many seats where the votes won by the Reform UK candidate pushed the Conservatives into third place, to the benefit of Labour and the Liberal Democrats. For example, in Redcar, the Conservatives won 12,340 votes, which was 6471 fewer votes than they won in 2019. However, Reform UK won 7216 votes, which enabled Labour to win the seat with 15,663 votes—only 379 more than it had polled in 2019.

In many constituencies, the Conservatives are losing support to Reform UK on the Right, and to Labour, and the Liberal Democrats, to the Left. Some support is also being lost to the Greens, albeit more particularly in local elections. This clearly poses a major dilemma for the Conservative Party, in terms of its electoral and ideological response. If it moves back towards the centre ground—and effectively adopts a Downsian strategy of maximising electoral support among supposedly politically moderate or median voters (Downs 1957)—it will almost certainly haemorrhage more support to Reform UK among voters who want more radical and/or authoritarian populist policies, having viewed Rishi Sunak as a technocratic centrist (in spite of his insistence that he was a Thatcherite). Yet, if the Conservatives do move to the Right to compete with or outflank Reform UK, the Party will probably lose more support to Labour, the Liberal Democrats, or maybe the Greens.

## Conclusion

The Conservatives' emphatic victory in the 2019 general election was mainly due to the unique policy issue which dominated the campaign, namely 'getting Brexit done', and public attitudes towards the leaders of the two main parties: the 'cheeky chappy' image manufactured by Boris Johnson (which endeared him to many working-class voters especially) and the unpopularity (both in terms of ideological stance, and dour personal character) of Jeremy Corbyn. Yet, this article reveals how the 2019 Conservative victory merely masked the long-term decline and disintegration of British Conservatism, as the Party increasingly became dominated by Thatcherism, long after Margaret Thatcher had resigned as leader. In thrall to economic neoliberalism and afflicted with market mania, most Conservatives instinctively assumed that almost any problems in the British economy were due to residual vestiges of social democracy which had not yet been eradicated, and therefore necessitated further deregulation, marketisation of public services, privatisation, reductions in government spending, shrinking of the civil service, tax cuts, weakening of trade unions and workers' rights, and welfare retrenchment. Equally, electoral defeats were invariably interpreted by the Conservative Right as evidence that the Party needed to adopt an even stronger Thatcherite stance, entailing unequivocal advocacy of the aforementioned neoliberal policies.



Yet, the hegemony of Thatcherism in the Conservative Party means that it has been unable or unwilling to acknowledge the shortcomings of many of these policies, or comprehend the extent to which they either created or compounded a plethora of economic and social problems, often due to their contradictory character or consequences. Intellectually, the Conservative Party has atrophied.

More generally, the Conservative Party's servility to Thatcherism, and its veneration of competition, individualism, labour market flexibility, and relentless change in the guise of modernisation or ever-increasing efficiency, has destabilised and unsettled swathes of the middle-class—people who previously looked to the Conservatives to provide continuity, defend their status, ensure stability, and provide security. Consequently, middle-class electoral support for the Conservative Party is steadily declining, compounded by newer types of white-collar and graduate jobs, and working-from-home which has, in turn, fostered geo-demographic changes to the electoral map. This is changing the electoral dynamics and political character of retirement and 'satellite towns' by imbuing them with greater social liberalism, and thereby weakening the former dominance of the Conservatives. This last trend is further compounded by the increased promotion and organisation of tactical voting and 'vote swapping'. All of these developments and consequences are weakening the Blue Wall in southern England, as the Conservative Party's relentless Thatcherite radicalism now generates anxiety, fear, insecurity, and a sense of betrayal, among much of the middle-class.

Whatever achievements the Conservative Party could boast in the 1980s, its relentless pursuit of Thatcherism subsequently has proved destructive of much which Conservatives previously cherished, and has increasingly alienated many former supporters among the middle-class. Moreover, the Party's continued slavish subservience to Thatcherism has grievously weakened British Conservatism itself. Indeed, the 'Thatcherised' Conservative Party has long ceased to be truly conservative, having pursued an ideologically driven, and increasingly divisive, permanent revolution, then either claiming that Thatcherism has still not yet been fully or properly implemented when problems have arisen or continued, or seeking scapegoats when the desired results did not materialise.

In this context, the Conservatives face an electoral quandary that appears intractable. If the Party seeks to move further to the Right to neutralise the challenge from Reform UK—as it seems likely to do under Kemi Badenoch's leadership—it is likely to lose further support from moderate or liberal Conservative voters switching to the Liberal Democrats, or a centrist Labour Party. However, if the Conservatives seek to tack back towards the centre ground by reverting to a One Nation stance, the Party will lose further support to Reform UK from those on the Right who want major cuts in immigration, public spending, and taxation, coupled with much tougher or authoritarian policies on crime, civil liberties, and human rights, 'soft' or (economically) 'useless' university degrees, and welfare.

Given the hegemony of Thatcherism in the Conservative Party, and the corresponding decline and diminution of One Nation Conservatives since the 1990s, a move back to the political centre seems very unlikely. On the contrary, those Conservatives who accused Rishi Sunak of having led a centrist or technocratic Conservative government until July 2024 will instinctively insist that the Party



needs to 'return' unequivocally to Thatcherism, thereby renewing or reinvigorating the policies first adopted in the 1980s, but supposedly abandoned by Sunak. As this article argues, this is simply not viable as an approach to statecraft in what is now a fundamentally different electoral landscape, and with an increasingly anxious and insecure middle-class.

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