**Three things to look for in the 2024 UK Election**

As the UK is approaching its General Election on July 4th, it seems clear that the Labour Party will win, with what looks likely to be a massive majority. After 14 years in government, the Conservative Party is looking at the possibility of another dramatic defeat, perhaps the worst in 100 years. However, while the overall result of the elections is almost certain, there are several things to watch for as the election nears, in the immediate aftermath, and in the longer term as the major parties react and adapt to the results.

1. "**The Conservatives and the Impact of Reform**

The Conservatives have been reduced to making pleas for people to vote for them on the basis that Labour’s having too large a majority might be problematic for Parliamentary democracy. They have faced some real difficulties. Most recently, they are facing acute embarrassment over the fact that it appears that two members of Parliament, (and a policeman) with close ties to Conservative Prime Minister Rishi Sunak placed bets on the date of his surprise election, presumably on the basis of inside knowledge. Before that, Sunak’s staff mishandled his schedule for a celebration of the Allied invasion of France towards the end of the Second World War, which upset some of its elderly supporters. They might be tempted to vote for The Reform Party, which has recently gained in popularity, and which poses a real problem for the Conservatives.

Reform builds on political currents which gave rise to Brexit. It appeals to people in depressed areas of the country, to those concerned about immigration, and to the culturally conservative. It has been given a boost the result of the owner of the party,[[1]](#endnote-1) Nigel Farage, suddenly deciding to stand for Parliament. He is a well-known figure for his role in Brexit, an accomplished speaker, who projects well to the media. (He is typically pictured drinking a pint of beer in a pub.) This gave a boost to Reform’s support – with one poll, as Farage was gleefully able to report, even suggesting that they might get a bigger percentage of the votes than would the Conservatives. Indeed, one recent poll – not yet supported by others – reports Farage as likely to take the seat that he is contesting, in a depressed seaside area on the East coast of England, with a large majority.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Support for the Reform Party spells trouble for the Conservatives just because Reform will draw support from them. As Britain has a ‘first past the post’ electoral system, it is not likely that Reform will win more than four seats, and may not win any. But Farage, who enjoys playing a disruptive role, has certainly put some colour into what, otherwise, has been a drab contest. Farage has also made various populist-style policy announcements, which have been treated very gently by the press. A piece about Reform headed ‘analysis’ in **The Times** on 17th June stated: ‘Whether the policies are realistic — indeed their viability and costings are likely to be heavily disputed — misses the point.’[[3]](#endnote-3) (The point, in the writer’s view, being simply that Reform aims to attract people away from the Conservatives: he did not seem interested in offering any critical appraisal of their claims!)

Sunak, leader of the Conservatives, is an earnest and capable man. He still (at 44 years old) gives the appearance of a bright young man who has made his way to the top by working very, very hard. But he has had to introduce a number of gimmicks to try to appeal to people whom the Conservatives might otherwise lose to Reform. In addition, he is championing ideas about cutting taxes which look implausible, given the dire state of Britain’s public services.

1. **How Much Damage Will the Liberal Democrats do to the Conservatives?**

It is also possible that the Liberal Democrats may do better than people have expected. They are a small party which was formed as a result of a merger between the old Liberal Party, and the Social Democrats. They broke away from Labour in 1981 at a point when they judged Labour to be too radical. Politically, the Liberal Democrats are friendly to the EU (although they have dropped their earlier support for an immediate application for re-entry). They tend to combine attractive ideas about reform, with, in some areas, community politics (e.g. concerns about how well sidewalks are being maintained). They are likely to attract former Conservative voters who don’t feel happy about voting for Labour, especially in areas in which the Liberal Democrats have, historically, had success, such as some commuter regions round London. They may also pick up seats in the South West of Britain, where there was a tradition of support for the Liberals, and people who do not like the Conservatives may vote tactically for the party most likely to displace them. It has until recently looked as if the Liberal Democrats would get a smaller percentage of the votes than will Reform,[[4]](#endnote-4) but they are anyway likely to get many more seats because their support is geographically concentrated. Support for them is likely to come from people who previously voted Conservative, but are repelled by Farage and Reform.

The problem for the Liberal Democrats, however, is that their MPs can do little more than offer a good service to their constituents, and offer bright ideas about reform to which no-one listens. Labour would not be interested in a coalition with them because they will be able to govern in their own right. While the Liberal Democrats’ last experience of coalition – with the Conservatives – was a disaster. They did not get Conservative support for some of their key policies, and they fared badly in the subsequent election.

1. **Labour and the SNP**

In Scotland, where I live, many seats which will be closely fought between the Scottish National Party and Labour. The SNP come over, currently, as more radical than Labour (which it is not difficult to do). Sir Kier Starmer the Labour leader, and his shadow cabinet, are bending over backwards to make themselves seem safe, and are aiming to fund reforms by way of encouraging economic growth. Growth and increased productivity are indeed much-needed. Labour can approach some problems here – like the reform of planning laws – in ways that would be politically impossible for the Conservatives.[[5]](#endnote-5) But Labour have not faced the problem that what they are hoping for by way of growth looks to be over-optimistic. The big question they need to face is: would they then cut back on hoped-for reforms, put up taxes or try to borrow more? Answering this question (which would introduce some honesty into the campaign) would risk compromising their emphasis on trying to combine reform with fiscal and financial conservatism.

If this issue is pressed against Labour, the SNP may gain, as they have been explicit in calling for higher taxation to deal with the funding problems of state-based provision. But the SNP are still suffering from the problems of their poor record in government in Scotland, the financial scandal in which they were involved, and people’s doubts about the viability of Scottish independence. My impression is that while Labour will do much better than they have in the past, they will not be quite as successful as they were hoping for against the SNP. It is also possible that in some more conservative areas, such as the one in which I live, where the real contest is between the SNP and the Conservatives, the SNP will gain the seat, because of a fall-off in Conservative support.

1. **One additional point**

One other thing to watch for, after the election, will be the impact of a heavy defeat on the Conservative Party. It currently looks as if a number of their senior figures – such as Jeremy Hunt, who is currently Chancellor of the Exchequer (finance minister) – may lose their seats in parliament. This will pose some interesting problems about how the Conservatives try to re-shape themselves after the election. **The Times** has recently reported that if Conservative losses go as predicted, their remaining Members of Parliament will be on the centre rather than the right of the Party.[[6]](#endnote-6) This will mean that those who would like to reshape the party in a more populist direction – to avoid future losses to Reform – may have a fight on their hands.

Losing their seat as an M.P. often marks the end of someone’s political career. This was notably the case for Michael Portillo, who was widely tipped as a future party leader. He lost what had been a safe Conservative seat in 1997, and despite subsequently returning to Parliament for another constituency lost out in a subsequent contest to be party leader in 2001. He ended up making documentaries about great train journeys for the British Broadcasting Corporation. One wonders what Hunt, and other distinguished figures, might end up doing. In the case of Sunak, while he is not likely to lose his seat, it is worth remembering that he held a U.S. Green Card until he felt had to give it up in October 2021, when he travelled to the U.S. as a British minister.[[7]](#endnote-7) It has been speculated that, if this election marks the end of his British political career, he might even look again at commercial possibilities in the U.S. This idea has indeed been mooted. Sunak responded that he would remain as an M.P. until the end of the next Parliament.[[8]](#endnote-8) But a parliamentary term in Britain can be up to five years long. And as former British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan said, even ‘A week is a long time in politics’.

1. As I mentioned in my previous piece which provides fuller background on the election [give details], Reform is not a political party in the ordinary sense, but a company owned by Farage. See https://www.economist.com/britain/2024/04/24/britains-reform-uk-party-does-not-exist [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.survation.com/farage-set-to-win-clacton/#:~:text=Survation's%20constituency%20poll%20in%20Clacton,the%20Conservatives%20to%20Reform%20UK>. The Economist ‘Polltracker’, on 21st June, suggests that he will receive only 16%, to Labour’s 24% and the Conservatives 44%. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Some brief but highly critical analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies <https://ifs.org.uk/articles/reform-uk-manifesto-reaction> has not received the kind of attention that it seems to me to deserve. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. E.g. **The Economist**’s ‘Polltracker’ on 21st June, which is based on an average of poll results, gave Reform 16% and the Liberal Democrats 11%, but other polls give Reform only half of the Liberal Democrats’ total. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Because their supporters are happy that the attractiveness of the areas in which they are living is preserved, regardless of the consequences of this for people’s general well-being. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See ‘Tory moderates set to dominate party after election’, **The Times**, 18th June 2024: https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/tory-moderates-set-to-dominate-party-after-election-pjrt3lp50 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. See the BBC’s report at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-61044847#:~:text=Chancellor%20Rishi%20Sunak%20held%20a,as%20a%20UK%20government%20minister. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. ‘Rishi Sunak pledges to serve as MP for full term if Tory party loses election’, **The Guardian**, 14th June 2024: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jun/14/rishi-sunak-mp-parliament-conservative-party-general-election [↑](#endnote-ref-8)