

HEGEMONY LOST

**The decline of the Tory
historical project**

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Introduction

The Conservative Party as the tethered beetle

September and October 2022 proved to be seismic political months. The Monarch of 70 years passed away, Boris Johnson was replaced by Elizabeth Truss and, together with the Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng, they embarked on a reckless economic program of unfunded tax cuts that spooked the markets and crashed the Pound. Soon after she was forced to sack her Chancellor and execute a series of U-turns, resulting in the collapse of her programme. Plummeting in the polls the Truss Government lasted only 45 days; a record short political life that was outlived even by an iceberg lettuce¹. The Tory Party does not tolerate failure – certainly not failure on this scale – thus Truss was swiftly replaced by Rishi Sunak following a ‘coronation’ engineered by Tory MPs, that skirted round the possible candidature of one Boris Johnson. Sunak has proceeded to rip up the wilder edges of her ‘Singapore on Thames’ neoliberal programme and installed a Cabinet aimed at unifying a fractured Conservative Party. Cue yet another Tory adaptation or in this case a ‘press of the reset button’. With eyes turning to Labour in ways that could not have been predicted a few months ago, the key question is whether Sunak can miraculously resurrect the fortunes of the Conservatives. He has two years to do so.

Repeated adaptations come at a cost. The longer-term effects of political shapeshifting can be likened to the tethered beetle in the horror film ‘The Wicker Man’. Hidden in a child’s desk at school is a large beetle with one leg tied to a piece of thread secured by a nail. Each time the beetle makes a circuit the thread tightens around the nail. We don’t actually get to see what happens to the beetle - ‘poor old thing’ - but we can guess. The tethered beetle metaphor applied to the Tory Party suggests that, even as it has reaped a short-term benefit from each adaptation, over the longer-term the Party finds itself in ever reducing ideological and political space. There could, of course, be a way out and that would be for the beetle to change direction and unravel the thread. But it would seem that the Tory Party, like that of the beetle, is now incapable of fundamentally changing direction.

The failure of the Truss experiment demonstrated the failure of the neoliberal dream. Staggering out of the wreckage the Conservatives can tack a bit towards the political centre ground and that is precisely what Sunak and Hunt are doing. However, in the process they are losing a sense of direction, other than their own survival, and thus they ultimately risk the loss of the Conservative political and historical project. In terms of the tethered beetle, this is not the lifesaving change of direction but simply the slowing down of the tethered circuits.

Their predicament is not just down to lack of focus or political skill, but critically the result of the chronic crisis of the neoliberal economic and social model. The brief Truss experiment of supercharged Reaganism could be seen as the terrible implementation of a failing idea. While historical determinism can lead to lazy politics – overdependence on the hidden hands of history – it is broadly true that neoliberalism has had its day; or to be more accurate it is coming to the end of 40 years of dominance. But the growing exhaustion of the low tax/trickle down economic and social model does not necessarily mean that a progressive era is around the corner, as the rise of Right populism has shown, not least recently in Sweden and Italy. But what it does signal is the declining political and ideological space for more of the same. And thus, the deeper crisis of the neoliberal model is an immediate problem for the Conservative Party. Having been in power for more than a decade, all that Sunak is realistically able to offer is a return to financial probity based on another bout of austerity.

Study the adaptive political adversary

Before getting carried away with Tory tethered beetle problems, and amidst the return of hope and anticipation of progressive government, there remains nevertheless a need for a sober assessment of Conservative adaptability. Hailed as the most successful political party in history² the Tories have undergone no fewer than five political iterations since 2005. Each time they have looked in a tight situation they've changed their political spots, managing to spring free and inflict a defeat on Labour. Nick Pearce and Joe Chrisp liken the Tories to a snake that *'has been adept at shedding its skin in recent years, inaugurating regular regime changes and skilfully disowning the policy legacies of previous administrations'*³.

This report, the fourth in the Compass series on the Conservatives⁴, has as its main motive the need to carefully study the political adversary, even one that appears to be on its last legs. It's not about copying the Tories but understanding how this political force behaves. Using key Gramscian political concepts adapted to the conditions of the 21st Century, the report analyses the basis of Conservative pragmatism, its repeated shapeshifting, the deployment of combinational politics to broaden their social appeal and the use of a reserve bloc of voters at critical moments over the past decade. The report then asks whether the previous conditions and methods for reinvention still pertain in 2022.

But the prospect of Conservative failure does not automatically mean Labour electoral success and in particular political transformational success. The report concludes with a brief review and a critical set of questions aimed at Starmer's Labour concerning their ability to replace the rapid decline of Conservative political hegemony with a more progressive version. Rather than 'winning by default', the question is 'winning to do what'?

Part 1:

**Conservative
adaptability and
political success**

'The party is an instrument for winning power by determining more quickly and surely than its competitors what the nation wants and how to provide it. A party that was identified with landowners, industrialists and plutocrats became also from the 1880s the party of "Villa Toryism" in the suburbs, from 1951 the party that ensured the building of even greater numbers of council houses than the post-war Labour government had achieved, and from 1980 the party that sold off those council houses to their working-class tenants'⁵.

The modern-day Conservative Party is a paradox. Its success as a political party has been marked by an ability to repeatedly adapt to wider changes and to ruthlessly focus on winning and retaining power. Recent achievements, however, have not solely been the result of political skill, but the result of built-in advantages - the huge influence of a right-wing press, wealthy donors and a rigged electoral system.

But these have not prevented the Conservative Party of the past 40 years from being serially incompetent when in government - boom and bust economics, widening inequalities, running down the NHS and public services, ecological vandalism and undermining democracy - the charge sheet is long and continues to grow apace. And yet, more often than not, they keep winning. It would, therefore, be relatively easy to focus on a critique of the policies and politics of the Conservatives in government. There will be a critical survey of current Conservative policy later, but first it's important to understand the factors behind the modifications of political shape and identity (shapeshifting) that have helped them gain and retain political power over the past dozen years despite a very chequered delivery record. To fail in government and then subsequently succeed electorally is a sure sign of political hegemony. On the other hand, the abject failure of the Truss experiment raises the question as to whether Conservative political hegemony is now in serious decline.

Conversely, it is imperative to understand why progressive forces, particularly the Labour Party, have proved less focused and nimble. Previous Compass analyses of the David Cameron, Theresa May and Boris Johnson victories over Labour have employed a Gramscian-style focussed on the capacities of the adversary.

'When you have been defeated on the field of political battle, you not only ask what you have done wrong but what your opponent has done right'⁶.

Part 2:

**A Gramscian
analytical toolkit**

While theory is not always easy it is important. Theory can afford deeper insights into current and past events and, at its most powerful, can also help glimpse into the future. Compass employs a Gramscian theoretical framework to analyse successive Tory adaptations (see Figure 1) and to understand why Labour has been repeatedly defeated. Antonio Gramsci's concepts can also be used to identify upcoming challenges for progressive politics.

Political hegemony – regressive and progressive

Used broadly to analyse modes of ruling by mixtures of consent and force, here the term hegemony is used in a more limited sense as the capacity to create a political narrative and dominate the political landscape. A recent example has been the ability of the Conservatives to shape a Brexit narrative and to lead a wider political formation that included Farage's UKIP/Brexit Parties. At this point, it may be helpful to distinguish between regressive and progressive forms of political hegemony. Regressive hegemony refers to situations where conservative political forces seek to restore advantageous political and ideological settlements to perpetuating their rule. Progressive hegemony, on the other hand, is linked to a historical project of progressive political forces to build a new economic, social and political order that involves the fundamental democratic reshaping of the political terrain.

Therefore, while this paper focuses on the capacity of the Conservatives to adapt to restore political advantage, the analysis also applies to the political opposition, particularly Labour. The capabilities of the dominant force have invariably been related to the weaknesses of the subordinate force. At the end of the report, questions are asked as to whether Labour aspires to progressive hegemonic politics or is destined to remain ideologically subordinate even if it were to win an election.

Adaptability and passive revolution

The allied change concept of 'passive revolution' refers to the capacity of a dominant party to renew itself by absorbing the energies and efforts of other political forces. Passive revolution also refers to a process of political modernisation which does not involve the active participation of the masses – hence the term passive. This concept is historically helpful in being able to situate successive Conservative adaptations since its inception as a political party in the early 19th century. Like hegemony, the concept of passive revolution can also be applied to the other political parties, as it was previously in relation to Blairism, with the argument that New Labour subordinated its seemingly progressive social agenda to the logic of neoliberal capitalism⁷. The concept of passive revolution as a form of modernisation thus can be contrasted to progressive transformations that need to be active and participatory.

Combinational politics and the 'Double Shuffle'

Any form of political renewal involves combinational politics in which a change of direction is not a singular movement from A to B, but the more complex addition of B to A. Cameronism added so called compassionate conservatism to Thatcherism whereas Johnsonism added English nationalism to Thatcherism, alongside a dose of big statism both promised via levelling up and delivered in relation to the pandemic. A key question is which kind of conservative combinational politics was at play under the Truss leadership and what combinational form is now being enacted by Sunak. Throughout recent Tory changes and arguably in relation to those to come, Thatcherism as a neoliberal Conservatism appears to remain a constant.

Stuart Hall's concept of the 'Double Shuffle' refers to relationships within the adaptive combination. Originally developed to understand the complexities of New Labour, Hall suggested that Blairism comprised dominant and subordinate elements; a dominant adaptive neoliberalism and a subordinate mild social democracy⁸. A ballroom metaphor based on leading and following dance movements, the Double Shuffle is applied here to Conservative reinventions and, in particular, Cameron's modernisation. It may also prove useful in relation to Starmer's Labour to explore the extent to which he seeks to repeat or to supersede Blair and Brown's combinational politics of the 1990s.

Political blocs

Adapting Gramsci's concept of the 'historical bloc', a more specific concept of 'political blocs' is important because it encourages us to look beyond the confines of a political party. A successful party always leads a political formation bigger than itself. In relation to the Conservative Party and its role in leading a Right Bloc, a previous report discussed its relationship with the nationalist Right in the form of UKIP, the DUP and the Brexit Party through what has been referred to as the 'Regressive Bloc or Regressive Alliance'⁹. Through the Brexit process, Boris Johnson and Dominic Cummings exploited the Regressive Bloc to extend the social appeal of conservatism, particularly to what is now referred to as the 'Red Wall'. Applied to the current period, the concept of bloc politics is used to analyse the evolution of the Right Bloc and the challenges facing the new Conservative leadership in the face of its rapid shrinkage. At the end of the paper, bloc analysis is also used to briefly highlight the challenges of building a Progressive Bloc to underpin a sustainable and transformative progressive government.

Part 3:

**Tory political
adaptability - a
recent history**

Recent historical analysis would suggest Conservative changes to their political persona have differed in both character and scale. In recognition, the generic term ‘adaptability’ is used to describe the sequence of changes and more specific terms are employed to describe each particular adaptation. Figure 1 summarises five change processes since 2005:

1. ‘Reinvention’ (Cameron/Osborne)
2. ‘Adjustment’ (May/Timothy)
3. ‘Shapeshifting’ (Johnson/Cummings)
4. ‘The Break’ (Truss/Kwarteng)
5. ‘Reset’ (Sunak/Hunt)

This historical and contextual analysis is also used to ask whether the latest Sunak ‘reset’ can succeed economically and politically to restore Conservative electoral fortunes?

Type of adaptability	Key political factors	Combinational politics	Bloc opportunity
Cameron’s social modernisation – reinvention	Success (up to 2005) and then exhaustion of New Labour (2008-2010) 2008 financial crash and crisis of public finances	‘Compassionate Conservatism’ + austerity	2006 – widening Tory social appeal 2010 – large Lib Dem vote (23%) 2010-2015 – Con-Lib Dem Coalition (57% of vote)
May’s middle way soft nationalism – adjustment	Brexit and accommodation of Euroscepticism Surprise success of Corbyn’s Labour (39% in 2017 GE)	Chamberlainite interventionism + Burkean Conservatism	2017 – 43% GE vote reduces UKIP vote from 18 to 2%, but forced to ally with DUP due to Labour surge
Johnson’s radical English nationalism – shapeshifting	Highwater mark of Brexit era Split Right Bloc and the need to absorb the Brexit Party Crisis of Corbyn’s Labour and growing loss of working-class vote (so called ‘Red Wall’)	English nationalism + neoliberalism	2019 – Brexit Party vote (25%) absorbed and thus 44% GE vote
Truss/Kwarteng experiment – the break	Acute cost of living and NHS crises	Britannia Unchained + right-wing Keynesianism	Rump Right bloc – 4% UKIP/Reform and DUP
Sunak/Hunt pragmatism – reset	Multiple crises + recession	Not being Truss and not being Johnson	Attempt to rebuild Blue Wall/Red Wall coalition

Figure 1. Four phases of Conservative political adaptation

Cameronism and Conservative modernisation

Conservative success in 2010 and 2015 was rooted in their response to repeated electoral defeats at the hands of New Labour. Following Lord Ashcroft’s seminal report ‘Smell the Coffee: A Wake-up Call for the Conservative Party’¹⁰, David Cameron was elected leader in 2006 and embarked upon what was called ‘one of

the most successful political reinventions ever'¹¹. In the space of a few years Cameron turned around the Tories' 'nasty party' image with several symbolic moves epitomised by his 'hug a hoodie' speech and the trip to the Arctic to highlight the impact of climate change, together with Iain Duncan Smith's 'Easterhouse Conversion' over social justice, the impact of climate change, together with Iain Duncan Smith's 'Easterhouse Conversion' over social justice.

The harshness of Thatcherism would be replaced by a 'compassionate Conservatism' that stressed social trust, individual empowerment and social liberation; political innovations supported by an array of centre-right think tanks including the Centre for Social Justice and an opening out of the Tory ranks to much more diverse candidates¹². 'Cameronism', rooted in the Conservative Party and its intellectual and political apparatuses, also arose out of a complex relationship with New Labour. Initially seen as copying 'early Blairism', Cameron's social liberal vision would soon be contrasted to 'late New Labour' and its managerial top-down politics. It aspired to be the 'heir to Blair'.

On closer analysis Cameronism could be seen as a Conservative version of Hall's 'Double Shuffle' or what will be referred to here as 'combinational politics'. Applied here, the Double Shuffle saw compassionate conservatism eventually subordinated by the policy of austerity as the dominant organising strand of Conservatism between 2010 and 2015. This form of combinational politics (Cameron's modernism + Osborne's Austerity) fanned the flames of Euroscepticism and the rise of Farage and UKIP. In the run-up to the 2015 General Election the main political task became preserving party unity over Europe and harnessing the white male and older voting bloc that had formed the bedrock of UKIP political expansion.

Cameronism morphed swiftly from Arctic visits to 'cutting out all the green crap' and promising an EU referendum to placate restless backbenchers. The Tories also hired the services of Lynton Crosby who ruthlessly focused on the well-rehearsed narrative that Labour was to blame for the 2008 financial crash and would endanger the hard-earned economic recovery. In terms of policy, the Conservative reinvention of the late noughties was soon all but dead. However, it had served a social purpose by sufficiently diversifying Tory membership that would allow the likes of Rishi Sunak, Kasi Kwarteng, Priti Patel and Suella Braverman to be promoted through the ranks.

Theresa May's 'soft nationalism' - a step towards Johnsonism

Cameron unexpectedly won a slim majority at the 2015 General Election but was compelled to deliver on an EU Referendum as the price for a temporary cessation of internal hostilities. As a Remainer he would go on to lose the Referendum and following his resignation the Conservatives swiftly chose Theresa May as the 'unity candidate' who was willing to champion a new settlement with the slogan 'Brexit means Brexit'.

May, with the help of her chief adviser Nick Timothy, sought to refashion a realigned Conservative political unity through what has been referred to as her 'soft nationalism'¹³. This comprised shifts towards a more traditionalist, interventionist, nationalist and 'Chamberlainite' form of Conservatism capable of uniting different factions in the post-Brexit context while also drawing UKIP into the Conservative orbit.

Nevertheless, these small but interesting ideological shifts would be overshadowed by poor electoral judgement that led to a hung parliament in 2017. The Conservatives were now forced to create a formal arrangement with the Northern Ireland DUP to preserve a working majority, with the 'Regressive Bloc' becoming a smaller formal alliance within Parliament.

Over the next 18 months Conservative support slowly declined before falling off a cliff in early 2019. Having braved a vote of no confidence in December 2018, May could not survive the tortuous EU negotiations and the disaster of the European Elections of 23 May in which Conservatives came fifth behind the Greens. Theresa May resigned the next day. Despite the attempts at political adaptation in the form of 'Mayism' she was swept away by Brexit.

Johnson's shapeshifting – the Tories become an English nationalist party

The concept of 'Conservative shapeshifting' has analysed how Johnson and Cummings succeeded in rapidly remaking the Tories as an English nationalist party following the EU referendum of 2016. An integral part of this process was Johnson's own opaque political identity. While always on the Right, his precise orientation was difficult to pin down because he wore ideological commitments lightly compared with his instincts of self-interest. The term 'shapeshifting' was used in relation to the Johnson period not only because of the very rapid makeover of Conservative political identity in 2019, but also due to Johnson's own chameleon political character.

But Johnsonism as a nationalist/Conservative combinational politics cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on the Conservative Party. Wider relationships across the Right Bloc proved to be critical. Close to home was his relationship with Dominic Cummings (not a Conservative Party member) whereby Johnson provided political charisma and Cummings, the political strategy cunning. Together they embarked on a Hard Brexit project to Hoover up the large reservoir of voters who previously were committed to UKIP, then Brexit Party and now Reform (see Figure 2). This involved the slogan 'Get Brexit Done' and an embrace of the 2018 influx of UKIP supporters within Conservative ranks.

At a greater distance was the dynamic with Nigel Farage and his respective political platforms. Commanding a position on the nationalist Right, Farage had worked tirelessly over decades to create the political atmosphere that eventually led us out

of the EU. The achievement of the Johnson/Cummings leadership was to move into his populist space and to rapidly morph the Conservatives into a Brexit-style party. The electoral effects were startling. Within the space of six months during 2019 the Tories moved from polling less than 10 per cent in the May European Parliamentary elections to achieving 44 per cent in the December UK General Election, albeit with the generous assistance of the growing unpopularity of Labour's Jeremy Corbyn. In these wider dalliances with the nationalist Right, Johnson took on the character of a 'third force' politician that suggested that he was beyond traditional party politics. Therein lay much of his political appeal.

Johnsonism in the period 2019 to 2022 was marked by the creation of the Red Wall/Blue Wall electoral coalition; the response to the COVID pandemic which saw levels of financial intervention unheard of by Conservative governments and promises of levelling up the country. But the Johnson era quickly unravelled due to perceived arrogance (Downing Street partying when everyone else was being denied the possibility of seeing goodbye to loved ones) together with his other personal failings, not least the seeming inability to focus on governing detail.

While the Blue Wall/Red Wall alliance was electorally successful, for Tory traditionalists it did not resemble true Conservatism. The relationship between Johnson and the Conservative Parliamentary Party took on the appearance of a Faustian Pact in which support for Johnson rested on perceptions of his electoral success. Johnson could pretend to be a right-wing Conservative and his MPs could pretend to support him. But if he lost the winning touch there was little point keeping him.

Trussonomics – a failed neoliberal experiment

Following the spending and state-oriented Johnson years, the so-called September mini budget (there was nothing mini about it) was hailed by Kwarteng as the 'big break' with economic orthodoxy and a 'new era for the UK' that was a repudiation of the previous 12 years of Conservative Government. Trussonomics emerged as an extreme Reaganite supply-side approach comprising sweeping tax cuts aimed at the wealthiest together with a bonfire of regulations and safeguards to turbo-charge market-led economic growth. The dash for growth and anticipation of trickle-down economics replaced levelling up marked a clear break from Johnson/Sunak economics and some of its politics. Signs of this highly ideologically driven Conservatism had been sitting in plain sight for a decade with its origins lying in the now notorious publication 'Britannia Unchained' (2012)¹⁴; a neoliberal manifesto involving both Truss and Kwarteng, which proffered a vision of the UK as the Singapore of Europe.

Comprehending Trussism (and by the same token Sunak's 'reset') also involves looking at what the Conservative Party has become in recent years. Since Cameron's stalled modernisation it has been moving steadily to the right under the

weight of Brexit, an influx of UKIP supporters in 2019 and Johnson's purge of Conservative parliamentary moderates in 2020. With the fall of Johnson, moving back towards the centre was not considered an option by the Tory party membership. Instead, they chose political purity.

Elizabeth Truss did not disappoint. Described as the '*high priestess of a narrow sect*' Truss quickly became increasingly isolated within the Conservative Parliamentary Party¹⁵, choosing to surround herself with fellow hard-right Thatcherites. Behind the-scenes political advisor appointments followed a similar pattern with highly ideological staff arriving from the Taxpayers Alliance, the Institute for Economic Affairs and the Adam Smith Institute whose common position has been to 'shrink the state'¹⁶. Compared with the political weave of the Blue Wall/Red Wall coalition, her politics looked distinctly monotone, resting on a single economic article of faith that market-led economic growth would trump all.

The Truss/Kwarteng extreme neo-liberal experiment collided with the hard realities of the market and the requirements of responsible governance. The result was multiple U-turns until there was virtually nothing left of the original programme. At that point Truss had to resign. The point here is that if you are in command of the process of adaptation policy reversals are less likely, whereas serial U-turns are a tell-tale sign of declining ideological and political hegemony.

Historical summary – conditions for adaptation

The spectacular failure of the Truss experiment puts fabled Tory political skill into perspective. They don't always succeed. The most convincing reinventions were political opposites in the Conservative firmament – Cameron's compassionate conservatism and Johnson's Brexit nationalism. When they do succeed three fundamental conditions would appear to be in play – the ability to dominate the political narrative; instability within the electorate marked by a reserve Right bloc of votes to be drawn on; and weaknesses in the political platform, performance and imagery of the opposition. As of November 2022, it does not look as if any of these factors for adaptation exist and as Figure 1 suggests, the Sunak leadership faces the same systemic problems as the failed predecessor.

Part 4:

**Rishi Sunak rises
from the political
dead to lead a ‘reset’
of policy and style**

The reset as pragmatic U-turns

Over the summer's leadership contest Rishi Sunak lost to Liz Truss who, in turn, was beaten by the fabled lettuce. In October he rose from the political dead, crowned by Tory MPs and the first person of colour to become Prime Minister. In the weeks that followed, along with the Chancellor Jeremy Hunt who was appointed by Truss to replace Kwasi Kwarteng, he proceeded to rip up the entire mini-budget and execute yet more policy U-turns. The first weeks of the Sunak regime have been devoted to settling the markets and while the pound and gilts have recovered a little since the dark days of the 'fiscal event', these economic indicators still look precarious. What Sunak has achieved is a period of temporary calm before the winter storm. And, as we will see, his reward has been a modest but significant bounce in the polls.

Winter crisis, Austerity 2.0 and the new recession

We live in an era of permanent and multiple crises; economic, social, ecological and conflictual - the likes of which have not experienced since the Second World War. The climate crisis is the biggest, as severe weather threatens lives and eco-systems as never before. For the past three years we have lived (and died) through a COVID pandemic that has claimed at least 150,000 lives in the UK alone. Added to this is now an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis. Even though there is an energy cap in operation from October 2022, energy prices will be twice that of last year; inflation is running at nearly 10 per cent and as a result of the failed mini-budget mortgage rates have risen. Furthermore, the impact of Russia-Ukraine conflict on energy and food supplies continues to play out.

The overall economic environment looks dire. Even the most competent of governments would face challenges, but Truss and Kwarteng in the space of a month cost the UK economy £300 billions in lost market value and left a £50 billion black hole in public finances¹⁷. As a result of both global factors and the home-made economic debacle it is inevitable that Rishi Sunak and his Chancellor Jeremy Hunt will have to implement public spending cuts – Austerity 2.0. It is thought that the Treasury Autumn Statement will announce £33 billions of expenditure cuts and £21 billions of tax rises mostly of the stealth type¹⁸. Added to which has been the announcement from the Bank of England that the UK is at risk of entering the longest recession for 100 years¹⁹. Sunak's political honeymoon period could be very short-lived.

The Brexit Window is closing

For nearly a decade the Brexit issue has had held UK politics in its thrall, but as of late 2022 that grip too is weakening. Increasing numbers are questioning whether it was the right decision to leave the EU. Far from being 'sorted', Brexit continues to be a drag weight on the UK economy and threatens the cohesion of the UK.

Moreover, as an issue it has also been relegated by the cost-of-living crisis. The consequences of the gradual but seemingly remorseless shift in opinion against Brexit are significant. The Tories will be denied a previously potent political weapon and, conversely, it ceases to be such a neuralgic issue for Labour, although its blanket denial of economic and cultural impacts could still hit the party electorally; peeling off some support to the Lib Dems and Greens. Instead of being politically totemic, Brexit is added to the long list of unstable political inheritances that any new Labour Government will have to manage. They will face growing pressure to re-join the EU. In October 2022, 57 per cent of those polled supported a reversal of the 2016 decision²⁰.

Tory (dis)unity and playing for time

As ever, Tory reinventions are primarily about the party itself. Sunak's immediate goals have been to restore semblance of unity within the parliamentary party and to achieve a degree of electoral standing. The challenges of unity have been highlighted by his reappointment of Suella Braverman as Home Secretary that reveals his dependence on support from the Conservative Hard Right²¹. Moreover, the resignation of Gavin Williamson as a result of bullying allegations places question marks over his political judgement. Another question is what Sunak stands for. Raphael Behr suggests that *'the Downing Street strategy looks like a hybrid of budget austerity, appealing to traditional, fiscal conservatives, and a Brexit border fixation to lock in those voters from former Labour heartlands who were more recently recruited to the Tory cause'*²². But this is not the strong regressive combinational politics of Johnsonism. Instead, it looks more like 'dilution' – less Johnson and less Truss.

The Conservatives are also playing for time and it looks that for now that Sunak has bought a respite. If a general election was to be held today the Tories could face a heavy defeat. Accordingly, their hope is that Sunak (who polls far better than his party) will be able to claw back electoral standing so that the Conservatives are seriously in the game for 2024.

Part 5:

The UK electoral terrain in 2022

Chances of political renewal will be influenced not only by the content of policy and its effects, but also by the dynamics of the wider political terrain.

Conservative electoral standing has seriously declined

Conservative political hegemony of recent years has been signalled by the 40+ per cent voting bloc. Since the EU Referendum they have managed to stitch together on critical moments (2017 and 2019) an electoral coalition approaching 45 per cent. However, the Conservative intended vote has been on the slide since early 2020. There was a 'Boris Bounce' in 2021 due to the rapid roll out of the COVID vaccination programme, but apart from that the direction has been broadly downhill. Conversely Starmer's Labour had been slowly improving to move to over 40 per cent during the summer of 2022. Then came the Truss/Kwarteng mini budget.

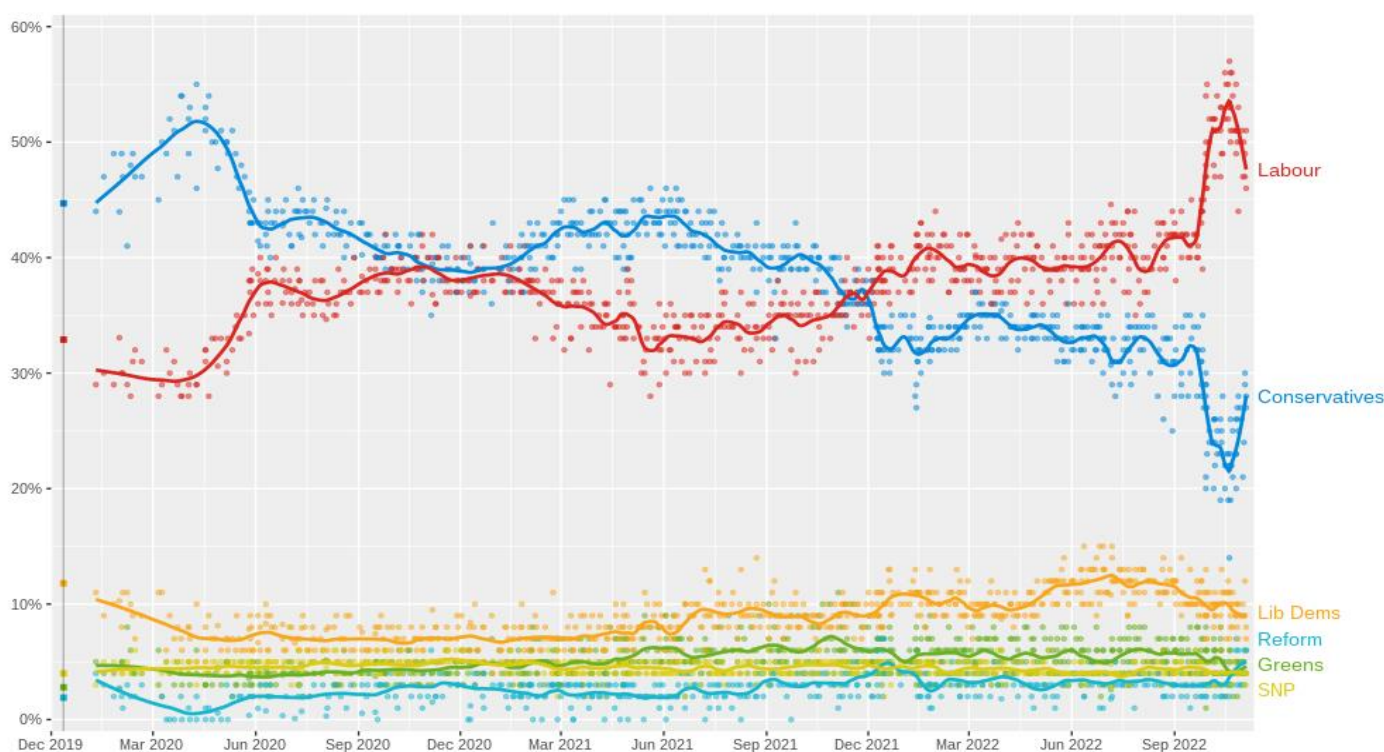


Figure 2. Voter intentions December 2019 – November 2022

Source: Wikipedia, 7 November 2022

In the weeks following the 'fiscal event' (October 2022) there was a Conservative electoral collapse (measured by voting intentions) with the average Conservative vote sliding to around the low 20s. Conversely, as a result of the Tory home-made economic crisis and following a successful annual conference, Starmer's Labour moved to over 50 per cent. It is also worth noting that Labour has been drawing increased support not only from the Conservatives, but also from the Lib Dems.

Following the Sunak 'coronation', as Figure 2 shows, the Tories have experienced a modest but significant recovery. Immediately prior to Truss's defenestration they were polling at an average of 24 per cent. As of the first week of November they had climbed to an average of 28-29 per cent. Labour on the other hand have moved

downwards from 50+ per cent to the upper 40s. Put another way, Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt have recovered about half the electoral ground lost through the failed Truss experiment. But this still leaves them 20 points adrift of Labour, twice the gap prior to the Truss/Kwarteng episode. However, the picture becomes more complex when comparing public trust in Sunak and Starmer on key economic issues – Sunak presently beats Starmer on economic management (50 to 39), whereas Starmer wins on cost-of-living crisis and energy (44 to 37)²³. But we need to remember that because of the disproportionate impact of ‘first past the post’ on Labour, the party must poll up to 12 per cent better than the Tories to secure a majority of just one. Given this handicap, the next election could well end up delivering a hung parliament.

The Conservative coalition has been unravelling

On the other hand, digging below the headline figures offers little good news for the Conservatives. Matt Goodwin’s Substack fills in the picture of electoral sub-blocs in mid-2022, immediately prior to the Truss leadership²⁴.

‘The Tories won in 2019 because they connected strongly with specific groups of voters: Brexiteers, pensioners, workers, non-graduates. Promises to Get Brexit Done, Take Back Control of Britain’s borders, and Level-Up the country, all delivered through Boris Johnson’s charisma, put the party’s support among these groups on steroids. But since last autumn this coalition has steadily unravelled. While Boris Johnson won three-quarters of all Brexit voters his party now only holds half of them; while he won more than two-thirds of pensioners his party now holds fewer than half of them; while he won over more than half the country’s skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers his party now holds only one in three of them’.

Focusing on the possible fall of the ‘Grey Wall’, Nick Pearce and Joe Chrisp echo Matt Goodwin’s point concerning the over 50’s vote, noting an average 20-point decline for the Tories since 2019²⁵. Moreover, none of these figures will have improved following the mini-budget and its political aftermath. And one final statistic brings home the electoral difficulties now facing the Conservatives - their standing amongst rural voters. This traditional bedrock of Tory support declined from 43 per cent in early August to 28 per cent in late September. Interestingly, rural voters have been transferring to Labour rather than to the Liberal Democrats²⁶.

The Regressive Bloc has declined – there is no reserve vote

In the period since 2005 Conservative electoral success has not resulted simply from the efforts of the party itself, but also its relationship with adjacent political forces. Successive Conservative reinventions have been based on the absorption of a reserve bloc of votes, whether these be Lib Dem in the run-up to the 2010 election, UKIP votes in 2015 and 2017 or Brexit Party/Reform votes in 2019. As

Figure 3 shows in this longer sweep of polls, a friendly reserve voter bloc is now virtually non-existent and cannot be drawn on to any effect.

Looked at another way, the size of the Regressive Bloc has shrunk since the period of the EU Referendum, the 2017 and 2019 General Elections. During what might be seen as the ‘Brexit Window’ (2014-2020), the Bloc stood at over 50 per cent based on the totals of Conservative and UKIP/Brexit/Reform party opinion poll and election results. In 2022 the Regressive Bloc is now largely confined to the Conservative party itself (28%), together with a rump of Reform/UKIP voters (3/4%). Calculated this way, the Regressive Bloc now totals no more than 33 per cent having shrunk by over a third since its highpoint in 2016-17. It is important here to note the progressive majority in evidence at the 2019 election, in which 14.3 million progressive party votes lost by 80 seats to 13.9 million regressive votes only because of the electoral competition on the progressive side.

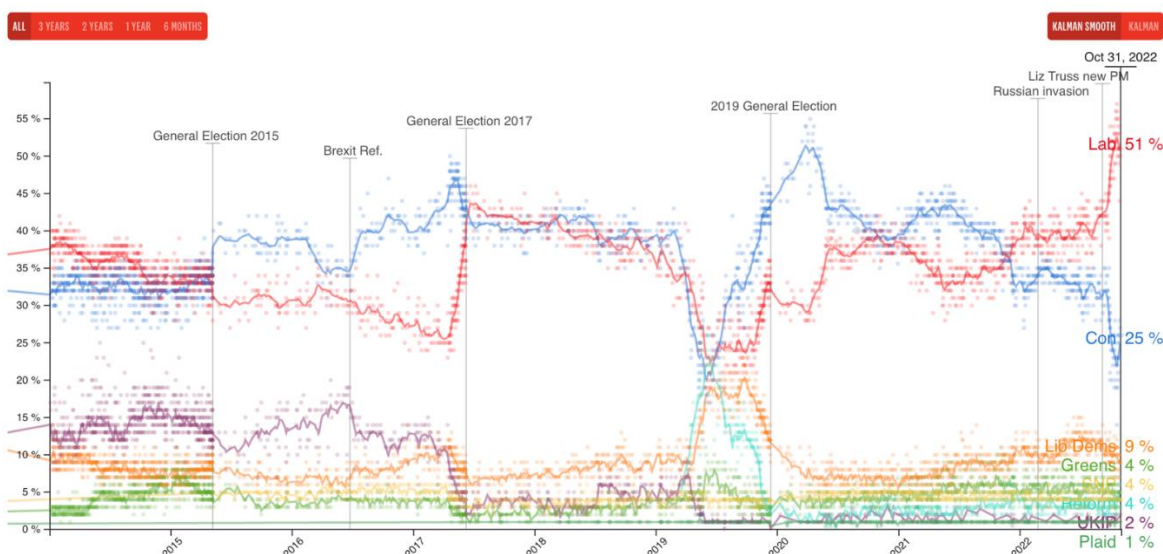


Figure 3: Voter intentions and polls – 2014-2022

Source: Politico UK (2022). National parliament voting intention, 30 October

Finally, it is interesting to compare current political patterns with the 2015 general election scenario that continues to mortify Labour Party members. Ed Miliband’s Labour was leading in the polls running up to the election only to eventually lose it. But there are important differences between now and then. Labour’s lead in late 2022 is by far in the way larger and more consistent; there is no Right reserve bloc in the form of a sizable UKIP vote; and following 12 years in power and the latest episode of economic incompetence, there are no plausible attack lines about Labour ruining the economy. The pendulum may well be swinging!

The decline of Conservative hegemony – a summary

But the rapid decline of political hegemony is about much more than poor opinion polls. While these are a critical barometer of public sentiment, issues of hegemonic political power run deeper.

In terms of the relationship between the Truss’s Tories and economic and social

class, there are two observations. First, the so-called mini budget created significant tensions between the Tories and various capitalist factions and, in particular, the markets primarily focused on the perceived lack of fiscal discipline. Second, the relationship between the Conservatives and sections of the middle-class look increasingly fraught, a process of detachment linked to Tory attacks on the public realm that started well before Truss became leader²⁷. Perceived natural economic, social and political bonds for the Tories are fraying. The elevation of Sunak is meant to put these things right. Hegemony is as much about ideology and politics as it is about an economics. What's most noticeable here is the new inability of the Conservatives to make the ideological and political weather. Of course, the decline of conservative political hegemony is intimately linked to the effectiveness of narratives and plans of the Opposition. But that's another question to be explored briefly at the end of this report and in greater depth in a subsequent publication.

There's also the question of demographics and the increased Conservative reliance on the older voting bloc. While seniors are reliable voters, they are less prone to activism. By the same token, the Conservatives have become increasingly detached from the more educated and economically productive social groups. The bedrocks of Conservative support are remorselessly shrinking, a process captured by Philip Burton-Cartledge in *'Falling Down: The Conservative Party and the Decline of Tory Britain'*²⁸. This portent of doom was actually written before the latest economic and political debacle.

Is there a way back for the Conservatives?

Amidst the Sunak reset, it still looks bad for the Conservatives. But as Simon Jenkins reminds us *'Never under-estimate the Tory party'*²⁹. However, this time it does look different. This is not only the result of a growing economic and social crisis, but also the searing effects of the failed Truss/Kwarteng experiment. Following Johnson, the Tories could have tacked more seriously towards the centre ground and really worried the Labour Party. However, they passed up their 'Penny Mordant moment' on not just one but on two occasions. The continued search for the 'real conservatism' might have had a better chance of success had there been a reserve right populist voting bloc, but this has been subsumed within the Conservative Party. There is therefore no easy way to grow the Tory vote other than eating into Labour and Lib Dem electoral blocs.

There may also be deeper reasons why Trussonomics failed and why the Sunak reset may suffer a similar fate; what Yanis Varoufakis refers to as the declining neoliberal business model *'inspired by Thatcher, modified by Blair, shored up by Osborne, undermined by Brexit and neglected by Boris Johnson'*³⁰. Put simply, this is not the 1980s nor the 1990s. The much-vaunted neoliberal economic model post-2008 has increasingly come to resemble the 'walking dead'. Unfortunately for us, Varoufakis foresees that the zombie model of trickledown economics or its equally undead relative of austerity will continue to haunt the UK for the next two years.

Part 6:

**Labour and the
challenge of
progressive
hegemony**

A major discussion of Labour and progressive hegemonic politics is not within the scope of this paper. It will be the focus of a subsequent one. In the meantime, this final section attempts an initial analysis of the challenges facing Labour arising from the spiralling decline of Conservative political hegemony. The earlier Gramscian analysis applied to the Conservatives can also be used to pose questions for Labour and the Lib Dems and Greens.

Is there such a thing as progressive shapeshifting?

If this refers to reinvention in order simply to change appearance, then the answer should be in the negative. Becoming chameleon-like is akin to deception. If, on the other hand, it suggests political evolution and the process of renewal to build dialogue and mutual understanding with various social and political forces, then the answer should be positive. As far as Labour is concerned ‘progressive adaptation’ would mean going beyond reheating Blairism. Mindful of the 2015 shock, Starmer has been employing a defensive strategy aimed at denying space for Conservative attack lines. However, employing a footballing metaphor, Labour should use their current political advantage to move from defence to transitional play. This involves not only elaborating policy – what they intend to do in government – but thinking about and communicating how they intend to expand democratic politics to bring about lasting progressive political change.

What might be meant by progressive combinational politics?

Previous Compass publications talked about the world of ‘and’ rather than the world of ‘versus’³¹. More often than not, the Left appears drawn to binaries rather than showing an interest in combinations. One relevant binary comes to mind – Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams’s techno-economic accelerationism v. folk politics³². What may be more productive than the posing of opposites is an exploration of possible combinations; in this case the potential relationship between the ‘accelerationism’ of strategic economic and technological development and a more ‘conservationist’ local civic involvement and the politics of place.

Is it possible to ride a hegemonic wave?

While hegemony is meant to be built rather than ridden, what is meant by this question is whether Labour can catch and shape the tide of underlying developments that are portents of the future? In this vein, Jeremy Gilbert recently stated that Labour should live and work in the conditions of the 2020s and not the 1990s³³. He argues that Labour should not simply focus on winning back Red Wall voters and the middle ground but embrace new social movements such as ‘Enough is Enough’ and a more assertive trade union movement.

What about a progressive political bloc?

As the regressive bloc has shrunk so a potential progressive bloc has expanded. As of October 2022, taking together the intended voting totals for Labour, Liberal Democrats and the Greens, a putative progressive alliance could command no less than 65 per cent of the English electorate. Different electoral dynamics apply to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but here the respective political terrains look promising. Achieving permanent shifts in political life within the UK will mean thinking in social and political bloc terms and rather focusing solely on the fortunes of a single political party. It is difficult but necessary to acknowledge that collaboration is the key, despite the obvious challenges of managing the tensions in such a Bloc. A key barrier to an expanded progressive bloc is the divisive issue of Scottish independence, although the success of the progressive alliance of Labour and Plaid Cymru should be noted here.

How can Starmer's Labour take its first steps towards a more open politics?

Winning office to govern is critically important. Everyone knows that. The question is winning to do what? It is possible to have a residual sympathy with Starmer's hesitancy about electoral reform and relationships with other the political parties. Labour were stung by the 'coalition of chaos' in 2015 and don't want it repeated. But to ignore the potential of the progressive bloc is extremely short-sighted. Given that the electorate appears to be ahead of the party leadership in this regard, voting understandings do not have to be formal, they simply have to be hinted at. The decision by Labour conference to back proportional representation is instructive here. The key would be what Labour would do once in government and to work in such a way that was friendly to adjacent political forces with which there is considerable policy convergence (barring Scottish independence). This would be particularly important if Labour was the largest party but without a majority. However, the same sentiment would apply if it could govern alone. If permanent social and political change is the goal, why would you want to make yourself friendless in parliament and in the country at large?

Does Labour understand the concept of political hegemony?

Unfortunately, not yet. Social democracy has not proved itself to be a natural learner and still has a great deal to understand about the processes of progressive politics in the 21st Century. Central to this, like almost everything else, is dialogue and collaboration. The Labour Party is too important to be left to itself and on its pathway to government we need to be working alongside it and inside it in the spirit of partnership to encourage the emergence of a progressive hegemonic outlook. The Tories look tired and are losing their historical project. More desirable and feasible futures are now at play, but the question is whether Labour can do more than to win by default.

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