

## In 1997, Labour said things could only get better. At p...

Published: January 13, 2026, 1:21 pm

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In light of this week's by-election results, there are a number of observations that can be made.

The first is that, as everyone who has watched the UK political scene for some time will know, by-elections are not good predictors of general election results.

Second, most UK general elections, do not change very much. We have had ten general elections since 1980. Only two resulted in a change in the governing party, although it could also be said that 2015 did result in the rejection of a coalition partner.

Third, in that case, what is clear is that it takes quite a lot for the British public to change their electoral minds, but when they do so, they tend not to regret the new choice for some time. This is why most parties have since 1980 enjoyed at least three consecutive terms in office, with the current government being on its fourth term. No one has enjoyed a fifth in recent history.

So, why do these changes take place? It is another commonly observed fact that UK governments lose power, and oppositions do not win it. In other words, the UK electorate have a tendency to stick with the devil that they know rather than risk change, unless and until the time has come to do so, which is when the party in office has proved itself incompetent.

Recent political events, and most especially reaction to the near disastrous premierships of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss, and Rishi Sunak all evidence that the UK electorate do think that the Conservatives have now proved themselves to be incompetent. People's reasons for reaching this conclusion will differ. There is, for example, no consensus amongst Conservative voters on the issue of Brexit. But, whatever the reason, the idea that the Conservatives time in office is reaching an end is now so very strongly held that the chance that they will lose the next election not because of anything that Labour, the Lib Dems, Greens, or SNP might do, but solely because of their own inability is now very high indeed.

Returning to the lessons that the by-elections might deliver, it does in that case seem plausible that on this occasion the massive rejection of the Conservatives in Somerset and Yorkshire is indicative of prevailing political sentiment. The fact that the overall swing against the Conservatives when the results of the three elections are aggregated was broadly typical of current opinion poll findings also suggests that this is the case. What, however, is equally clear is that the electorate has yet to be convinced by the opposition.

Of the major political parties that took part in these elections, the Tories have every reason to be frightened.

The Liberal Democrats, returning from near oblivion, have every reason to be pleased.

The Greens came third in every seat, and whilst there are no general election prizes for coming third such is the absurdity of our voting system, they have every reason to be pleased with that. The chance that they might grow the number of Green seats at the next election is high.

But what, then, Labour? That is the real question. There are, as usual, a number of points to note.

Firstly, whilst the result in Selby was obviously encouraging for them, and even historic, it does fit the by-election trend. Such an obviously Conservative seat cannot be relied upon to return a Labour MP at the general election when the likely electorate turns out in full, as it most definitely did not do on this occasion. In fact, what was very clear in this election result was that the Tories did not vote in vast numbers and Labour only managed to increase its vote slightly. There is little comfort for Labour in this. If I was the new MP I would not be banking on a long career in Westminster as yet, however youthful he might be.

More importantly, what voters in Somerset proved was that they now have the ability to pick winners within the first-past-the-post system, and where Labour has only a slight chance of winning they will now transfer their votes to the Liberal Democrats if that helps remove a Tory incumbent. Very large numbers of seats that on the basis of generic swings might look to be possible Labour wins do, on this basis, look to be more likely to fall to the Liberal Democrats next time. This trend may not, of course, be replicated in a general election, but in broad terms, I think electors are now sufficiently savvy for the tendency to be quite apparent whenever the UK votes as a whole.

And then there was Uxbridge. Labour made a total mess of this campaign. Local parties do not like candidates being imposed upon them, especially when they appear completely alien in their views.

Labour also totally misread the situation with regard to ULEZ. What could have been a campaign strength, because the imposition of this charge on Uxbridge was entirely the

fault of Tory policy, became a campaign weakness. It takes some considerable inability to achieve that.

But most of all, as I have said before and as I will no doubt say again, the long shadow of Rachel Reeves and Keir Starmer hung all over this campaign with their refusal to commit Labour to anything that looks remotely like a policy, let alone like a spending commitment that might benefit a community. This, no doubt, contributed massively to Labour's failure in what should have been a foregone win for them.

If Labour has anything to learn from this campaign it is that making vague noises about issues is not enough. People want recognisable commitments that will have an impact upon their lives if they are to really believe that Labour can provide them with the alternative Government that they need. Instead, Labour had nothing useful to say on ULEZ, and most significantly could say nothing at all about how they would help those most impacted by it to transition to the environmentally compliant cars that they will now need, and as a result the electorate could not identify with their campaign.

I am well aware that I have been saying for some time that Labour has no ideas and is utterly constrained by its dedication to austerity, but the point has to be made again, and no doubt many more times between now and the next general election. Unless Labour can really decide what it is for then it is not a government in waiting. It is, instead, at best an interim placeholder whilst the Tories regroup for a return by 2029 or 2030. That would be disastrous, not just for Labour, but for the country as a whole. Right now, though, it looks to be exactly where Labour is.

In 1997, Labour said things could only get better. At present it is true to say that Labour can only get better. They are that dire. I think that the electorate has rumbled this. Unless the Labour leadership takes note the UK now faces the prospect of having a failed government with no obviously competent successor available. That may be unprecedented.