

What is the point of the Tories?

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For hundreds of years, the Tories have been one of the two parties that have at all times dominated UK politics. The other might have changed from time to time, but the Tories have been a constant. That, though, can no longer be assumed to be the case. Now, they might be heading for extinction. Does that matter?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owGvhiFTa90?si=Jwguz8aCiMv6C5X9>

This is the audio version of this video:

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And this is the transcript:

What is the point of the Tories? I have to ask the question because they are, of course, meeting in their party conference this week, and most of the world will ignore them.

Now, that's not surprising. They have spent 14 years in government and then lost the last general election so badly that they are reduced to a rump of the party that they used to be. I think there are around 131 members left in parliament.

They are the official opposition.

They do have the right to stand up and question Keir Starmer every week as Prime Minister about what he's doing.

But the truth is, at this point in time, they still have Rishi Sunak as leader; they haven't chosen a new one, and they don't appear to have any clue where they're going.

That fact is represented by the choice of candidates that are being put forward to be that leader. Now, some have already dropped out, and we know that more will very soon. But whoever becomes the Tory leader, we can summarise their policy position very simply.

They will be on what, in conventional terms, was the far right of the Conservative Party. Not only, in conventional terms, the far right of the Conservative Party, but the far right of British politics.

We are not used to having leaders who are so anti-government, so anti-migration, so anti-support for those in need, as are those who are standing to lead the Conservative Party. They are in a space that we are simply unfamiliar with in the lifetime of almost anybody with a political memory in the UK now.

So, the Conservative Party is in an extraordinary position, without a leader at the moment, without an idea, and with a political policy agenda that appears to appeal to a tiny minority of people in this country but where they are directly challenged by Reform, who have a much more charismatic leader - balmier policies without a shadow of a doubt, but a stronger appeal to a public who are looking for something completely different from mainstream politics, which the Tories are still thought to represent. So, they are in the most extraordinarily difficult political position.

There is no doubt that the Overton window of UK politics has shifted to the right. The Overton window is a term used to describe the broad positioning of the political playing field when it comes to what is deemed to be acceptable political debate at any point in time. So, narratives around left-wing politics have virtually disappeared from public debate at present, and everything is around various forms of right-wing thinking.

That's partly because the Labour Party, as we know, has shifted heavily towards the right. Frankly, these days, there would be very little to choose between David Cameron in 2010 and Keir Starmer in 2024 - both weak, ineffectual men without any idea of how to run a government or how to run a country, offering an agenda which is meant to be a broadly based appeal to a population who voted for them in desperation. They are both centre-right politicians, and that is what the Tories used to be and what Labour is now.

On the other hand, on the other side of the Tory party, there is, as I've already said, Reform. And they are now stuck in a pincer movement between a centre-right Labour party and a far-right Reform party, and they're trying to move to the far right to differentiate themselves from Labour, whilst also taking on Reform, against whom,

frankly, they have little to offer.

I'm not saying that Reform are great: I'm just saying that if you're going to put forward barmy political opinion, then Reform are better at it than the Tories.

So, this matters. And it matters for one simple reason. We have a two-party political system in the UK. We have done for centuries. And within that century's old tradition, the Tories have existed for apparently over 300 years. The longest single political force in world political history. And yet, they are at risk of disappearing, squeezed out from the centre-right and from the far right to the point where they might not exist.

And that matters because in a two-party system, you need an effective opposition that can appeal to sufficient people to pose a threat to the government in office so that it believes that it has to deliver policies that are acceptable to most people in the country, or they face the credible threat of not being re-elected.

We are in the position where, at present, the Tories may not be able to offer that credible threat, and I doubt that Reform can either because whilst they have a limited appeal with up to maybe 20 per cent of the population of the UK, beyond that I think there are few who would actually be willing to countenance voting for them. So, they do not create a credible threat, and nor does, as we have seen, a right-wing Tory party do anything like that either.

So, what's really at stake at present is not just the Tory party and its future, about which to some extent I am indifferent, but our whole current political setup in the UK, to which Labour is dedicated.

If we could move past the first-past-the-post electoral system and have a much more representative system of electing parliaments, the demise of the Conservative Party would not matter one iota. Somebody would come in and fill the natural void that they will have left. But when we do have only two political parties who can, it seems, at any time, dominate the political scene, the demise of one that has been there for two to three hundred years really does matter because it means that Labour is not going to be challenged.

And the barmy politics of Reform will be there, on offer, unable to challenge Labour, but present enough to destabilise the whole democratic process.

So, the Tories really do have a responsibility to do something for the good of the country as a whole still. And that is to move back into a centre ground, which they abandoned some time ago; to provide an alternative narrative to Labour, which will in turn force Labour to move left, to pick up voters from areas which they have abandoned, and to then recreate a dialogue of narrative around what we as a country really need, rather than to play in the gutter on the right.

Will they do that? Will they offer us this opportunity to actually restore the political well-being of the UK? I doubt it. I can't see the Tories are going to go there at all.

At the present point in time, the leadership candidates on offer are all, frankly, failed cabinet ministers without an idea between them of any consequence. So, I don't see this possibility. But it really does worry me. We do need a functioning political system in the UK or we don't get effective government. The Tories do matter in the sense that they formed part of that functioning political system for so long that their absence will be destabilising. And I don't think we need that instability.

We either have to pray that the Tory party comes back into some shape where it might be elected, God forbid, or we have to pray that Labour might see the light and allow us a proper proportional representation system for elections in the UK.

But if neither of those things happens, the question has to be, will we have a functioning political system in the UK? And because the demise of the Tories lets us ask that question, they do matter, however repugnant they might be.