

[Transcript] The News Agents / Elections 2023: Are the Tories doomed?

This is a Global Player original podcast.

We're having fantastic results across the country.

Plymouth, what a night they've had in Plymouth.

And then Stoke.

And up to Middlesbrough,

all the places that we need to win the battlegrounds,

we are on course for a Labour majority at the next general election.

CHEERING

No, he's not listing football teams.

It's the sound of a man, Kia Stammer,

who has scored the best Labour performance in a set of local elections since the party's expulsion from office in 2010.

It's a performance that is genuinely solid and in some places even impressive.

They've taken back bellwether councils like Swindon, Plymouth, Medway,

they've won back Blackpool, they've won East Staffordshire,

places which tug so hard on Labour's heartstrings,

the sort of places the Labour Party was born, like Stoke on Trent.

It was, for Stammer, a very solid performance in the old Hackneyed Red Wall, patched up, part-mended.

But is it enough?

On today's election news agents, the very best news agents,

we'll be taking you through what we've learned from today and last night,

what stayed the same and asking whether we are really heading

for the first Labour general election victory since 2005

and whether that's even the right question.

It's Lewis here. Welcome to the news agents.

The news agents.

First thing to remember, this was just England voting and not even all of England.

Turnout was low, not exactly helped by new voter ID laws.

Scotland, Wales, London, the biggest cities all left out.

And these things aren't just about national politics,

but they do make the political weather in Westminster.

And for the first time,

the Labour Party will be the biggest in local government since 2002.

On a projected national share,

Labour is about eight points or so ahead of the Conservatives,

enough to take them to within spitting distance of a majority,

though probably not quite enough to make it.

When Stammer became Labour leader,

he bet the House, the party,

on a relentless Red Wall strategy.

There would be no mention of Brexit.

There was a bet, a gamble,

that there was no liberal force to their left to which to lose votes.

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That seems, finally, to be paying off.
A far cry from only two years ago
when the party was losing the Hartlepool by-election
was still retreating.
The crimson dots on the map still shrinking.
And Takeaway One is really interesting.
The data shows that actually the party's best performances
were in areas with fewer graduates,
the places they'd been retreating hardest since Brexit.
That Brexit and the shadow it cast over the party seems to be fading.
Perhaps the Conservatives had an opportunity
that they failed to convert.
Perhaps to some extent, it was always overblown.
Lord Robert Haywood is a Conservative peer,
but also an expert on elections.
I mean, what really strikes me about these results,
particularly in Labour actually doing pretty well
in many places in the old so-called red wall,
genuine signs of revival.
I mean, it felt, even as recently as, say, 2021,
even to some extent last year,
that this realignment that was occurring
was just almost inexorable against Labour in these sort of places
and the Conservatives continuing to proceed.
It feels as if perhaps Brexit
is losing some of its salience electorally now.
I can agree with the second half of your question
that Brexit is losing its salience
for a number of different reasons.
But I was never convinced that there was actually
a clear conversion of people from the Labour Party to the Conservatives.
It was an issue and a personality-driven change,
which, with the departure of Boris Johnson
and the problems associated with Brexit
from the Johnson administration,
has resulted in people reviewing where they'd come to
in terms of political support in 2019.
I thought that was very much a one-off.
So, in a sense, we are seeing some sort of restoration,
that that was simply a, that was a sui generis period.
It was a unique period.
And now there is a sort of restoration to pre-2019, pre-2016.
That's right. I think that's what's actually happening.
It's not like what we saw in the United States

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in the 1960s, 70s and 80s.

Where there was a marked and ongoing shift under different Republican leaders of former Dixie crats, Democrats, moving towards the Republicans.

It never felt so much as an ongoing basis, which it was in the United States.

So, Labour is coming back, a little gingerly, perhaps in places, strongly in others.

We'll assess if it's enough in a moment.

But Liz Kendall, Shadow Minister, bound it into the news agent studio on Friday afternoon.

The taste of victory for her party at last.

I mean, this is the first time I have felt we have a really a genuine shot at getting into government.

Although I've been an MP since 2010, I've been involved since 1996, was involved in the work for Harriet Harman in the 97 election one for many, many years.

And, you know, we're back, we're back in the North, in the West Midlands, the East Midlands, the Southwest, the Southeast.

And we're back in new places too, which I think doesn't get enough attention.

So, we're winning in the places that we need to win to form the next government.

But there's no coronations in politics.

There's probably, you know, a year to 18 months to go.

And there's an awful lot more we have to do.

But when I think about how awful 2019 was to be back in this position, if you'd have told me back, then I wouldn't have believed you.

I mean, that is the sort of surprise, maybe to me as well, in the sense that it felt like in 2019, actually as recent is 2021, that you go back to the Hartlepool by-election and that period, it's only two years ago.

It felt as if there was a realignment in these places that was just inescapable and it was crushing.

And yet, that doesn't seem to be the case.

What do you attribute that to?

Is that the Conservatives' failure to capitalise on it?

Or is it something in particular about Keir Starmer's strategy?

Maybe a bit of both.

What do you think it is?

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I think about the huge changes I've seen probably since around 2015. People were voting for change and they still want change, but they don't see it being delivered.

And that is what I think we're seeing in the so-called, I mean, I don't particularly like these terms because they're far too generalised, but the so-called Red War seats where people wanted to see change, they didn't feel the country was working for them and they still don't see it now.

We're seeing it in some of the so-called Blue War seats where I think, you know, traditional Conservative voters, I think about some members of my family who just saw what Johnson did as terrible his lying and Liz Truss crashing the economy.

I think that has been a huge problem for the Conservatives, but it is also the case that people have looked to see the alternative and they've seen that Keir Starmer has changed the Labour Party and he's offering something different for the country.

We have got a long way to go yet.

I mean, I see it as the sort of, we said we had a mountain to climb, it's Everest and we have smashed through Basecamp, but we are not at the summit.

Why is it then that, I mean, if people are looking at Starmer in that way, why is it that his personal ratings are so tepid?

I mean, in a way, isn't the truth that you and the Tories have got the opposite problem, which is that your brand is much better as a party than this point now, than the Conservatives is, but Starmer is, maybe he's not an anchor, but he's not an enormous asset, according to the polly, and Sunak is the opposite.

He is something of an asset, but the party brand is so trashed that it doesn't seem to be helping them as much.

Well, I think when we are winning back in Swindon and Blackpool and Erewash, Worcester that we haven't won since 2001, Medway, absolutely seismic shifts there.

Keir Starmer is a huge part of that.

I simply don't believe I do.

And I think people see...

On the doorstep, people were saying I love Keir Starmer, I want Keir Starmer to be Prime Minister.

There's enthusiasm.

Do you think there was genuine enthusiasm for him?

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People see him as a man of integrity,
and they see he has changed the Labour Party.
Well, some people say that he's not integrity.
He basically decided to go back on money
the promises that he won the Labour leadership on.
I mean, that's not a sign of integrity.
That's not what I hear when I'm campaigning,
and I don't mean in my...
No, I don't believe that that is true.
I believe his principles have stayed the same,
but he's looked at what's happened since 2019,
the state of the economy,
and has said we've got to be honest with people
that we can't be spending huge amounts of money all the time.
We have to be able to show what our priorities are.
I mean, the Labour leadership was in 2020.
The pandemic had started by that point.
It's not just the pandemic.
No, I know, but sure.
But he knew that when he promised that about tuition fees,
and now he's gone back on it.
I mean, that's not the only example of that.
He remains completely committed
to sorting out the tuition fee situation, which is a mess.
But let's go back to your original point,
which is what are we seeing happening?
And you said you felt was there sort of fundamental realignment.
I think the fundamental change in politics is volatility.
You cannot just say,
well, there are labour areas, Tory areas,
there are Brexit areas, remain areas.
It's a very simple shorthand.
I think that is what has changed,
not that under Johnson,
that there was a fundamental realignment with Brexit,
but that there is volatility.
So that is an opportunity for us in the Labour Party
to have changed as Keir...
I mean, it's unbelievable how much he's changed to the Labour Party.
But it also means that whilst these are great results today,
there's still a long way to go till the next election.
And that's what we have to guard against.
I mean, I'm proud, but I am not complacent.
I think that volatility point is a really interesting one.

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And I think it's spot-on really in terms of what the electorate is, which is a big change from the past. But that obviously means that if it is volatile, so you think it is, and I think you're right, then obviously in the 18 months or so before the next general election, there's a lot of volatility there that could potentially swing back on you. And are you happy that, given that we have had... I mean, we couldn't have had much for the worst 12 months of the Conservative Party. I mean, one of the prime ministers was brought down in disgrace in a complete scandal of his own making and brought public life and integrity into disrepute. The second one, his successor, was brought down by herself and her own economic policies and literally made the cost of living worse for hundreds of thousands of people across the country. And yet despite that, and you've had Sunak, you know, having strikes and inflation out of control and so on and so forth, small boats issue, and despite that, according to the Projected National Share, you're eight points ahead. I mean, are you satisfied with that? I mean, I'm never satisfied and I'm always... I'm a warrior. I'm a warrior, I'm a warrior. 10, 12, 14 points to give you... Because actually, if you come down much from eight, then you really are into quite dicey territory. But if you look at where we need to win, you look at Plymouth, places like Plymouth, you'll see Asswing there is at the level... We haven't seen since 1995. If you look at Medway, huge swing back to the levels in the 90s. And as I said, if you look at somewhere like Worcester, that we lost in 2005, or Telford in the Reakin... I mean, we lost Reakin in 2001. I was old enough to remember all of this. I think where we need to win, we are focusing, and I make no apology for that, and we are winning those seats back. But I am always a... I am always a warrior. I remember, you know, 1992, waking up the morning after that. And I'll talk soon at once. But I think the whole Labour team understands that. But if Labour is advancing, that must mean the Tories are going backwards. And in places, boy, they really are. They lost Bromsgrove in the West Midlands, held since 1999, Brentwood in Essex, Tamworth in Staffordshire,

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Hartzmere in Hertfordshire, East Lindsay in Lincolnshire, and Northwest Leicestershire.

It looks like they'll lose around a third of the councillors they had going into these elections.

And remember, they were defending a 2019 baseline, the fag end of the Theresa May Premiership, where in those elections, they'd done appallingly.

The Prime Minister, as you'd imagine, tried to put a brave face on it. Prime Minister, the South East, the South West, Midlands, the North, you're losing everywhere.

Prime Minister, why is that?

It's always disappointing to lose hard-working councillors, their friends, their colleagues, and I'm so grateful to them for everything that they've done.

And in terms of the results, it's still early.

We've just had a quarter of the results in, but what I am going to carry on doing is delivering on the people's priorities, halving inflation, growing the economy, reducing debt, cutting waiting lists and stopping the boats.

That's what people want us to do.

That's what I'm going to keep hard at doing.

And of course, he was backed up by Greg Hans, the Conservative Party Chairman.

Whilst this has been a disappointing night overall for the Conservatives, I don't see that Labour are showing the sort of momentum that Tony Blair was able to show before 1997.

The year before 1997, Labour won 1,600 seats overall.

The Conservatives lost 1,900.

So I don't think Labour are showing the progress that they need to be showing.

That was Hans in the morning.

In the afternoon, as more results came in, he seemed to be a little less bullish, a little more skittish, in an email to party members.

He wrote this.

I know the results are disappointing.

I know people are worried about what Labour councils will mean for their local communities.

But I want to be totally honest with you.

These local elections are a massive wake-up call.

If you want to stop Kirstammer, then we have to come together now.

Gavin Barwell is Theresa May's former Chief of Staff,

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himself formerly an MP in a marginal seat
and has seen elections come and go.
This was his assessment of where his party is at.
So, Lord Barwell, on a scale from one to ten for the Conservatives,
one being everything's hunky-dory,
we're on course, fellas, to ten being Apocalypse.
Where do you think this ranks?
This is a sort of seven or eight, I would say.
So, I think if you look at it in terms of the Conservative party's performance,
it's pretty depressing.
But if you look at it in terms of Labour's performance,
although they've done well,
they're below what I would say the threshold is,
they need to be winning an election.
I would say the two things to look at are,
do you get over 40% as the main opposition party
in National Equipment Vote Share?
They've fallen short of that.
And what's the kind of lead you've got over the main party?
So, they look like they're about eight points ahead.
That's the best they've done since 2010.
But it's only a bit better than Ed Miliband did in 2012.
It's nowhere near as good as Tony Blair did in the 1990s.
So, if you're asking me, I'm trying to be sort of neutral here, as it were,
I think that the glimmer of hope,
I wouldn't put it stronger than that for Downing Street,
they're not as up against it as Major was in the mid-1990s.
There's still a path forward, but they're pretty bad results.
The truth is, isn't it, that maybe we obsess a bit about 97 too much,
in the sense that, okay, maybe these results indicate that
this isn't, Labour's not on course for a Blair landslide,
but all the Tories really have to do is lose 40 or so seats.
No one will work with them in a hung parliament.
And then you add in Scotland onto this as well, which wasn't voting yesterday,
Wales as well, London, and you start to see a path which is darker
for the government than these figures might suggest.
Yeah, I think particularly Scotland,
where I think Labour now have a chance of winning a reasonable number of seats,
which they probably wouldn't have thought they had six months ago.
But you're right, I think if the exam question is,
what's the chance of Keir Starmer becoming Prime Minister,
that's a pretty high probability event at the next election.
If the question is, are Labour going to win an outright majority
and be able to govern on their own, that's a much more difficult proposition.

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And I would say these results suggest the former is probably going to happen, but the latter maybe not.

And something presumably we'll start hearing more about from the Conservatives in the run-up to that general election, right? In that sense, it might be more of a rerun of 2015.

Yeah, so they'll try and run the kind of coalition of chaos argument that they ran against their Miliband in 2015.

Bit trickier after the last few years, I suppose.

Yeah, I mean, it's a point that Miliband tweets about every now and then, isn't it? But Starmer, I think, will try and rule out the SMP option.

And I think there'll be a lot more focus on therefore on the Liberal Democrats and what they might want in any kind of arrangement with Labour.

One of the things that will worry number 10 is that from the results that we've seen so far, voters were quite adept at working out, whether it was a Labour, Liberal Democrat, Independent, Green, who was the candidate that was best placed to beat them in these elections. So if you get a significant tactical vote at a general election, that amplifies whatever the sort of national swing is and makes their job even more difficult.

Isn't it true through this, Lord Barwell, as well, what number 10 have got to try and grapple with is that to some extent, these results, not just these results, but results in the past few cycles have shown, is that the pillars of the Conservative election victory of 2019 just aren't there anymore. Brexit is no longer a particularly salient issue, and where it is, it's arguably damaging for the Conservatives in the south of England. Corbyn's not there anymore.

And there isn't really beyond Sunak saying, look, I've steadied the ship, which takes you so far, maybe he's stopped the bleeding or he's stopped the ship sinking. But the ship still is sinking.

There isn't a clear alternative strategy to replace 2019. I think he's inherited a terrible mess.

Both of his predecessors did real damage to the Conservative Brown and in particular, I think, was trust because in a way, the Conservative Party's kind of existential building block of any election strategy has always been economic competence. And trust attacked that kind of fundamental pillar.

So I think he inherited a hugely difficult position.

And what they'll take some hope from is the personal comparison. You'll know that if you look at the polling and say, who are you going to vote for at the next election, they're way behind. But if you say, who would you prefer as Prime Minister,

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Keir Starmer or Rishi Sunak, it's kind of neck and neck on that basis.
So I think they'll probably try and run quite a personal election campaign
that centres on him and tries to convince voters
that he represents a very different kind of Conservative Party
to Boris Johnson and his trust.
And where do you think talking about Boris Johnson and his trust
and Boris Johnson in particular, I wouldn't imagine it's going to be long now.
I mean, Sunak feels secure,
which probably wasn't always a given after these elections,
but nonetheless, he feels secure.
But I can't imagine it's too long before we start hearing from voices
on the right of the party who are starting to cry, look, things aren't improving.
You know, we've tried this, he's had a fair shot, things aren't improving.
Where do you think it leaves Boris Johnson in the right of the Conservative Party?
And what do you think their play will be over the next six months?
So I think if they're going to try and argue that they should bring him back,
I don't think that's going to get traction with a wide enough group of Conservative MPs.
Now, I think that if you look back to his evidence in front of the Privileges Committee,
we've still got their report to come.
He tried to lead a rebellion against the Windsor framework,
only 20 out of his colleagues followed him on that.
Where I think you might see some argument is on some of the kind of policy prospectus.
So if you take an issue like housing,
there's clearly quite a deep divide in the party about whether to
essentially appeal to NIMBYs and scale back local house building,
or actually whether the Conservative Party needs a really strong offer
about tackling the housing crisis.
So you might see some people in the party trying to challenge
Sunak on some of the policy agenda that he's offering.
But I think you're right to say that Sunak looks pretty secure.
And when you were just trying to describe what their critique might be,
and you were saying, well, it's not working.
Actually, the poem shows he has made some progress in narrowing the gap.
The problem is the gap is just so huge, he's struggling to go all the way.
But it would be very difficult, I think, for anyone
analyzing British politics to argue that he hasn't got the Conservative Party
in a better position today than the one he inherited.
Hands, and as you just heard there, Gavin Barwell,
weren't the only ones talking again and again in the coverage
about the 1997 general election.
All through the night or through the day,
the coverage was punctuated by endless talk of whether this set of elections
are as bad for the Tories as the 1995 local elections,
or whether this would ultimately be like the 1992 general election

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and a Conservative Prime Minister would storm back and so on.
The second big takeaway I'd say is this, we need to forget about that.
At the risk of stating the most obvious things since the news agents began,
we're not in the 1990s anymore.
Other historical comparisons, possibilities for our future politics are available.
And what I mean by that is that everyone always focuses
on the gap between Labour and Tory.
And yes, as I said to Liz Kenville, they would like it to be larger.
Maybe it should be a little bit larger.
But what was reaffirmed in these elections, again,
is that there is a very big anti-conservative majority,
expressing itself repeatedly in the polls.
And even under first past the post,
that will be punishing for the Tories if sustained at a general election,
as it was in these local elections.
In that sense, the general election you'd be better off thinking about is 1964,
a long-standing Conservative government giving way to a very narrow Labour majority,
a second election perhaps, shortly afterwards.
Or perhaps more opposite still is 2010, an unpopular long-standing government,
an opposition leader with winded assails,
but with a huge electoral mountain to climb,
and who hasn't quite sealed the deal with the electorates.
And that, of course, takes you into potential coalition territory.
A theme we'll be exploring right after this.
Welcome back.
So when I said that the 2010 election is a better election
for you to keep in mind than the 1997 election,
it is especially opposite when you consider another takeaway from these elections.
The Lib Dems are back.
Are you ready?
Yes!
Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.
Olden ticket with Britain's Got Talent.
That's right.
Well, this is sort of textbook,
Liberal Democrat victory parade, I think.
We've seen before them use bulldozers to knock down blue walls.
We've seen hammers now clock being used.
Liberal Democrats making big gains across the country.
We've beaten the Conservatives in Bath and in Brentwood,
in Hertfordshire and in Hinckley.
We're making gains off Labour.
We've increased our majority in Hull.
And we're making huge gains across the country against the Conservatives.

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We're continuing to make sure the blue wall tumbles down.
That was their leader, Ed Davy,
performing one of his now regular stunts after an election night,
this time holding a clock aloft for some reason that no one could quite work out.
But the Lib Dems did have a great night.
They won control of Theresa May's backyard in Windsor and Maidenhead.
They won control of the Deans of Harwyst, Stratford upon Avon.
They deprived the Conservatives of control in Deputy PM Oliver Dowd, Harzmer. In lots of places, they smashed the Tories.
The Greens too won control of True Blue, Mid Suffolk,
with another great set of local election results.
So here's another takeaway.
Yes, Brexit realignment appears to have slowed or ceased in the North for now,
but in the South, in some of those higher graduate, more remain areas,
they continue to shift away from the Tories.
And that's despite the fact that on paper,
Rishi Sunak might be a more palatable offer for them than Liz Truss or Boris Johnson.
Stephen Bush is Associate Editor of The Financial Times.
The other interesting thing that, you know, the dog didn't bark in this set of local elections
is that, yeah, for basically this whole period of time, as you've said,
it's been pretty clear since about 20, well, even in 2021,
but it's basically been pretty clear since then that there is organized
and fairly active and efficient progressive voting against the Conservatives.
And then since 2022, there has been a majority of the country
that has voted for one of these three political parties.
But of course, Rishi Sunak is much more popular among liberal voters than Boris Johnson was.
And what we didn't know is whether or not that very efficient tactical voting
was going to keep happening.
And the interesting thing is it has.
It is very hard seeing as there is not an obvious coalition partner for the Conservatives.
It is, I would say, pretty obvious that we are going to continue to see the kind of,
you know, basically where voters of all stripes for those three parties kind of gang up on
the Conservatives in their local areas, it feels therefore unlikely to me
that there is a plausible account of how the Conservatives can hold on
unless, you know, Rishi Sunak somehow does find some policy lever that means he has,
like, you know, the most successful Prime Minister in terms of wage growth ever,
which would be lovely, but I don't think I'm going to bet on it.
The point of all this is to say that we become obsessed with majorities and landslides,
but we forget, A, the huge mountain Stalmers labour has to climb,
just to get a majority of one and 1945 Clement-Atley style swing required,
but B, that they don't have to win that many seats to enter government.
The Tories have no coalition partners left, no one will do a deal with them.
They need to win a majority of one or they're probably done.
And so with all this evidence of progressive voters, labour, lib dem, green, doing all they can

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to remove the Tories, we should be talking much more about the hung parliament and potential coalition partners going into the next general election, something I put to lib dem deputy leader Daisy Cooper.

I think we're going to see Liberal Democrats making huge significant advances and for us, that's very exciting. But in terms of what might happen at the next general election, certainly between now and 10pm on close of polls on the day of the next general election, myself and all of my colleagues will be focused completely on just getting more and more Liberal Democrat MPs elected.

And every time we have the opportunity to talk to the public, we want to talk about our vision. Of course, I get that. But all I'm saying to you is can you imagine a situation?

We know what happened with your party was burned severely last time by coalition government. Could you imagine a situation in which you would repeat the experience, but this time with a Labour Party?

Honestly, I think right now as votes are starting to come in,

I don't think anybody really wants to sort of take the time to imagine what might happen after the next general election.

I do. I guarantee if you continue to be successful, then that will be the conversation.

You've got to have given that some thought,

or you've got to give it some thought over the next 12 to 18 months, haven't you?

You know what? I know it's a conversation that a lot of people want to have, and I think it's legitimate to ask the question.

But at the same time as deputy leader of my party, of the Liberal Democrats,

I really have got a laser-like focus on the time we've got between now and the next general election. You know, we won't take votes for granted in the way that the Conservatives do.

We know that there's a lot of heavy lifting to be done in the next few months, but I think what we can see from these results today is that we are on course, as Liberal Democrats, to oust a number of Conservative MPs, and however frustrating that might be for you or for journalists in the public, we are determined to focus on that.

Put it this way, you won't be going into coalition with the Conservatives, will you?

No, absolutely not. No, Ed Davy and I have absolutely ruled out any chance of us going into coalition with the Conservatives.

So you've obviously thought about that.

You've got time in your laser-like sort of focus, nonetheless, to have thought about that.

So the fact you rule that out and the fact you won't rule out coalition with the Labour Party does kind of tell voters what they need to know, doesn't it?

Well, I think when it tells voters is, and what we tell voters is what voters are telling us, voters are telling us that they are sick to the backing of this Conservative Government, and like Labour, the Liberal Democrats are an opposition party,

and they won't be surprised that we're focusing our attention on the performance of the sitting government, and they've been found not just wanting,

but the performance is utterly miserable when it comes to the NHS and the cost of living, and just about everything else, quite frankly.

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It poses questions for Labour too. Stephen Bush had thoughts on this as well. I think we can already see from the way they're going, oh, well look, this shows the wrong course to a majority, that his preferred approach will be not to talk about it very often, for two reasons. One, although the SNP look to be in a period of crisis at the moment, I think the fear of a Labour-SNP tarp is still probably quite strong, and that's definitely been my impression going around parts of England. There is still some joy to be had for the Conservatives there. Still resonates, the 2015 stress. Yeah, if that feels like a live possibility again, that is a problem for the Labour Party, but internally, and in some ways I think the more intriguing subplot is, if you ask the Shadow Cabinet, if you said to them, hey look, how do you feel about power sharing with the Liberal Democrats? Some of them, their eyes would light up like hubcaps, and they go, that'd be great, you know, we'd have been more liberal than the Labour Party's instincts are on immigration. You won't be reliant on the left of the party? Yeah, exactly, and then some of them would go, yeah, my right arm will fall off before I do any kind of deal with those yellow, et cetera, et cetera. And that debate, I think, is going to be the one that, you know, Keir Starmer himself will want to keep a lid on it, but it will be with you, it will be the talk of Labour Party Conference, it will be the talk of, you know, the various sort of fringe events that happen in the Labour Party calendar between then and now, and it will be the thing that different Shadow Cabinet ministers, will I imagine, whether they want to or not, almost without, yeah, essentially without meaning to, will start to slightly hint, you know, are you someone who doesn't fear coalition, or are you someone who thinks that the Labour Party is at its best when it governs alone? So, cannon to the north of him, cannon to the south of him, Sunak is stuck in a vice, a pincer movement, but at least from these elections, we know that there is one army who hasn't even shown up. Reform, remember then, the successor to the Brexit Party itself, a successor to UKIP, is nowhere, something which hasn't been remarked upon much in this election analysis, but as Robert Haywood says, is really important. There's no question that large numbers of people who have not taken to Rishi, who voted Conservative in 2019,

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might actually be inclined to vote for a Farage East Party,
but the Reform Party failed to put up very many candidates.
UKIP put up almost 1400 in 2019,
they put up between 400 and 500,
and the candidates have got nowhere, no return councillors, minute votes.
So, that does remove one,
nothing could ever be said completely in politics,
but it substantially removes the threat of the Reform Party
to the Tory Party and to Rishi Sunak.
So, at the very least, there is nothing to Sunak's right
that can pose a problem for him,
which gives him not only electoral advantage,
but also political room for manoeuvre.
Unless Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson choose to coalesce
and move something for the populist right,
the answer is no, there isn't something,
because Reform, they chose the wards,
which I have to presume are the best wards they could find,
and they've still got meager, if not miserable, results.
There is one more glimmer for Sunak.
Normally, after an election as bad as this,
a leader would be sitting very uncomfortably atop his tower,
but the tower, for now at least, feels stable,
more on what he can do just after this.
This is The News Agents.
Welcome back.
So, yes, at least Sunak can feel, temporarily at least,
secure in office, if not from the electorate,
then from his own party.
A while ago, it was assumed that the aftermath of these elections
would be a moment of maximum jeopardy for him,
that there could be a move against him.
It doesn't feel like that now.
His enemies, principally Johnson, remain too tarnished, too dangerous.
He is more popular than his party.
He can still, with a great deal of justification,
blame some of his travails on his predecessors.
Labour, though, will extract momentum from these results.
He will find himself that bit more beleaguered.
The final takeaway is that the pillars of the 2019
Conservative election victory, Brexit, Corbyn,
ending the chaos, really feel as if, electrically, they're gone.
And the macro question is that there still feels for Sunak,
little to take its place.

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He's steadied the ship, but it is still sinking,
and there's only so long he can blame the captains who came before.
At some point, he needs a strategy beyond mere competence.
After all that has happened, it was always going to be a narrow path
for a fifth term for the Conservatives.
It feels after today that the path has got thinner.
It's got harder.
The best that can be said for him and for them
is that it is, perhaps, still just about there.
That's it from all of us for this week.
Remember, you can catch up on all of our shows from the week
just gone on Global Player and send us story tips
and feedback to newsagents at global.com.
I'll be out reporting on the coronation tomorrow.
You'll be able to see a special film report on that
on our social media channels over the course of the weekend.
If any of you are actually listening to this on the Mall
or near the Palace, you've probably already spotted
John and Emily, funnily enough, right at the front.
That's, of course, why they couldn't be here today.
Monarchists, to a fault, they both insisted
they had to reserve a special place, special tent,
right at the front.
Early doors yesterday, coronation china in tow.
There is even a rumour that they might end up on the balcony.
Emily, anyway.
Thanks to our production team as well on the newsagents,
Gabriel Radis, Laura Fitzpatrick, Ellie Clifford,
Georgia Foxwell, Will Gibson-Smith, Alex Barnett,
Ann Rory Simon, our editor is Tom Hughes,
and our executive producer is Dino Sophos.
It's presented by Emily Maitlis, John Soaple, and me, Lewis Goodall.
We'll see you on Tuesday.
Have a lovely weekend.
This has been a Global Player original podcast
and a Persephoneka production.