The Conservative Party is behaving like a team that has discovered the secret playbook to victory — even as the scoreline keeps getting worse. Their leaders talk themselves into optimism because Labour is in crisis and Reform UK's surge looks "unsustainable", yet every set of numbers suggests the Tories are still structurally broken, not secretly poised for a comeback.

The starting point is brutal: the 2024 general election was the Conservatives' worst result in roughly two centuries, wiping them out in Wales and leaving them with a shattered parliamentary presence after four consecutive wins between 2010 and 2019. A party once described as the natural party of government suddenly looked more like a relic of a vanished political order.

Post-mortems are strikingly consistent about why. Years of leadership churn, Brexit psychodrama, "partygate", the Truss mini-Budget fiasco and Sunak's error-strewn 2024 campaign combined to turn "Tory" into shorthand for incompetence and chaos. Academic analysis of the 2024 race suggests the result was less a positive vote for Labour than a mass act of repudiation against the Conservatives, amplified by the rise of Reform UK on their right flank. Far from one bad campaign, the defeat capped fourteen years of "arrogance, imperiousness, contempt and incompetence," in the words of one scholarly assessment.

A Labour government already fraying

On paper, this should be the Conservatives' chance. Labour's landslide government has shed support at historically rapid speed, with YouGov and other series showing the party falling from its 2024 high into the teens by late 2025 and early 2026. Scandals around Peter Mandelson's vetting role, leak inquiries, and rows over Sue Gray's appointment have fed a sense of sleaze and drift, while public approval of Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves has plunged into deeply negative territory.

At the same time, Labour's coalition is visibly fragmenting in both directions. Local-election and Westminster polling shows younger, urban voters peeling off towards the Greens, while disillusioned "red wall" and more socially conservative voters experiment with Reform UK or simply stay home. A governing party that won a huge majority barely two years ago now routinely finds itself polling third in national

voting intention behind both Reform and the Conservatives. In a rational two-party system, this is the moment when the opposition surges.

It is not happening. Instead, Britain now has something closer to a five-party stalemate: Reform UK first, Labour and the Conservatives bunched in the teens, Greens and Lib Dems not far behind. The Conservatives are not the automatic beneficiary of Labour's woes; they are just another damaged brand in a crowded marketplace.

The Tory 'plan': chase Reform and wait for gravity

Inside Conservative circles, however, you hear a remarkably optimistic story about all this. The core bet has three parts.

First, they assume that Labour's collapse will continue to the point where Starmer's government looks as discredited as the late-Sunak Tories, making a change of government feel inevitable again — this time in their favour. Second, they believe Reform's current lead is a sugar high, inflated by protest votes in the mid-term and vulnerable to a squeeze in a general election framed as "serious government versus angry outsiders". Third, they argue that if they tack right on immigration, culture and crime — and signal openness to some kind of rapprochement with Reform — they can re-unite the right-of-centre vote while Labour is busy bleeding to its left.

Polling among Conservative members reinforces this instinct. Surveys show roughly half of Tory members want the party to move further right, and roughly the same proportion think the next leader should primarily target Reform voters. A substantial minority of members and voters say they would support a merger or at least an electoral pact with Nigel Farage's party, even if both sets of supporters remain divided about a full fusion.

Add in one more comforting data point: Kemi Badenoch, the party's current leader, has the only favourability trend in Westminster that's actually improving. Around 29% of Britons view her favourably — her best score yet — and among 2024

Conservative voters her net rating has soared to robustly positive levels, with improvement even among Reform supporters. For many Tories, this looks like proof that the strategy is working: sharpen the message, lean into the culture war, keep talking about small boats and “real Britain”, and wait for Labour’s mess plus first-past-the-post to do the rest.

Why the strategy keeps failing

The problem is that almost every piece of evidence that gives Conservatives hope contains a trap they refuse to acknowledge.

Start with Reform. Yes, some Conservative councillors and MPs are now surviving in multi-party contests because Reform splits the anti-Labour vote, allowing a Tory to win on a smaller plurality. But at the national level, every poll shows huge chunks of the 2019 Tory vote still parked with Farage’s party — and those voters are not obviously desperate to come home. YouGov’s analysis of the 2026 local elections suggests that fully one-third of 2024 Conservative general-election voters who turned out this May switched to Reform, while nearly nine in ten Reform voters stuck with their new choice. That is not a tentative protest; it looks more like a hardening realignment.

Then there is the delusion of the pure “right-wing coalition”. Conservative members like to imagine that if only the Tories moved further right, Reform’s voters would flow in behind them, producing an unbeatable bloc. In reality, the numbers don’t add up so neatly. Polling of both Conservative and Reform voters shows a near-even split on whether they even want the two parties merged, and clear anxieties about identity and extremism among more traditional Tory supporters. For every ex-Labour voter in the Midlands who might be attracted by a harder-line immigration pitch, there is a suburban moderate in the south of England who looks at Farage-flavoured Toryism and reaches for the Lib Dems or Greens instead.

Above all, the focus on Reform lets Conservatives avoid the more uncomfortable truth: the main reason they lost in 2024 was not that they were insufficiently right-wing, but that voters stopped believing they were competent or honest. You cannot fix a reputation for chaos and broken promises simply by shouting louder

about border controls. You have to show steadiness, discipline and results — precisely the traits the party has failed to exhibit in fourteen years of internal warfare.

Labour’s pain is not Tory gain

There is a similar misreading of Labour’s predicament. Tory optimists look at Labour’s collapse — third in some polls, haemorrhaging voters to both Greens and Reform — and see the outline of a repeat of 2010–2019 in reverse. If Labour could govern badly for thirteen years yet keep winning until the end, why not the Conservatives?

The answer lies in the structure of the emerging party system. When the Tories were dominant, they faced one large rival (Labour), a smaller centrist party (Lib Dems) and a few regionals. Today, Labour faces simultaneous challenges from its left and right — but so do the Conservatives. Reform’s growth is not limited to “Labour Leave” seats; it is eating into the Conservative core vote in southern and coastal areas, while the Greens have become a serious option for younger and liberal voters who might once have drifted to Cameron-style modern Tories.

Opinion data underscores this fragmentation. Recent national polls have Reform in the mid-20s, Labour and the Tories clustered in the high-teens, with Greens and Lib Dems in the low- to mid-teens. In that environment, both big parties can implode simultaneously, and both can be punished brutally for perceived incompetence. Labour is already learning that lesson in office; the Conservatives are kidding themselves if they think voters have forgotten who governed for the previous fourteen years.

The way back, if it exists

None of this means the Conservative Party is doomed. It does mean that the “winning plan” many in the party comfort themselves with — chase Reform, wait for Labour to fall over, trust the electoral system — is really a sophisticated form of denial.

A serious strategy would start by accepting that Britain is now a multi-party democracy in practice, whatever the electoral system says on paper. It would treat Reform not just as a rival to be cannibalised, but as a symptom of deeper failures on trust, inequality and regional alienation that the Conservatives helped create and never resolved. It would recognise that chasing every hard-right voter risks losing university-educated, metropolitan and younger voters forever — voters who, in a world of fragmented pluralities, can decide dozens of seats.

And it would stop outsourcing strategy to focus groups of party members. Tory activists may overwhelmingly want a move to the right and dream of a pact with Farage, but the wider electorate clearly does not. Voters angry with Labour do not automatically forgive the Conservatives; many simply choose a different protest vehicle, whether that is Reform, the Greens or staying home.

The Conservatives are not wrong to see opportunity in Labour's implosion. They are wrong to think that opportunity will fall into their laps without a fundamental rethink of what they are for, who they want to represent and how they govern when they get there. As long as they cling to the fantasy that one more right-turn and one more Labour scandal will magically restore the old two-party script, they will keep discovering the same cruel reality at every election night: they might feel like they are on the winning plan — but they are still the ones losing.

References and Further Reading

1. BBC News. (2024, July 4). *Ione Wells: What went wrong for the Conservative Party?* https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4ng05k1z0eo
2. BBC News. (2024, June 11). *Conservative manifesto 2024: 12 key policies analysed.* https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/crgglmwwlggo
3. Electoral Reform Society. (2024, December 9). *A system out of step: The 2024 general election.* https://electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/a-system-out-of-step-the-2024-general-election/
4. The British Academy / Election Analysis. (2024, July 14). *Election 2024 and rise*

of Reform UK: The beginning of the end of the Conservative Party? https://www.electionanalysis.uk/uk-election-analysis-2024/section-4-parties-and-the-campaign/election-2024-and-rise-of-reform-uk/

5. Pew Research Center. (2024, December 10). *Global elections in 2024: What we learned in a year of political disruption.* https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2024/12/11/global-elections-in-2024-what-we-learned-in-a-year-of-political-disruption/
6. Public Policy School of Finland (SPF). (2026, March 5). *What does the UK Conservative Party's defeat mean for Britain's political future?* https://www.spf.org/iina/en/articles/tom-sutton_01.html
7. Royal Holloway, University of London. (2026, May 26). *2024 general election and the rise of Reform UK.* https://www.royalholloway.ac.uk/about-us/stories/rise-of-reform-uk/
8. YouGov. (2026, May 4). *Voting intention, 4-5 May 2026: Ref 25%, Lab 18%, Con 17%, Grn …* https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54701-voting-intention-4-5-may-2026-ref-25-lab-18-con-17-grn-14
9. YouGov. (2026, May 11). *General election 2024: can the Conservatives tempt back former voters?* https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/49595-general-election-2024-can-the-conservatives-tempt-back-former-voters
10. YouGov. (2026, May 14). *Why do Tory members think the party lost the 2024 general election?* https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/50470-why-do-tory-members-think-the-party-lost-the-2024-general-election
11. YouGov. (2026, May 26). *Political favourability ratings, April 2026.* https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54604-political-favourability-ratings-april-2026
12. YouGov. (2026, May 26). *Labour's voter coalition broke more to left than right at 2026 local elections.* https://yougov.com/en-gb/articles/54811-labours-voter-coalition-broke-more-to-left-than-right-at-2026-local-elections