

## By riding the tiger of populism, the Conservatives may have destroyed the UK

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It's a familiar cliché that the Conservative Party is the most successful political party in the democratic world. Once called the [natural party of government](#), it has been in power for most of the last 150 years and, for good or ill, has shaped modern Britain. The UK is a conservative country in all senses of the word.

But the past four decades have demonstrated that the modern Conservative Party can no longer be trusted in its role as the guardian of British institutions.

The revolutionary free-market zealotry of the Thatcherites and their successors not only put the social fabric of Britain under severe strain, but also undermined the credibility of the UK's constitutional arrangements. Of the three pillars of High Toryism; church, state and monarchy, Britons only seem to still like the latter.

The decline in Tory respect for British institutions has also been on full display, not least in David Cameron's willingness to risk the union's survival twice – first in the [Scottish Independence referendum](#), and then, probably fatally, in the EU membership referendum.

The Scottish National Party (SNP) leader and first minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, has already [signalled](#) that she will in all likelihood now call another referendum at a time of her government's choosing. The leaders of Sinn Féin, meanwhile, are calling for a [referendum on Irish unification](#). In time, we will now quite probably witness the break-up of the UK – all because of an arrogant and ill-starred gamble for partisan advantage.

Even worse, the Tories have wreaked this havoc on the UK while riding the tiger of angry populism that they have done so much to cause in the first place. In England in particular, this populist rage has mapped to a certain extent onto the resurgent nationalism amplified by the Scottish referendum.



The destroyers. [Stefan Rousseau/PA](#)

On the day after the result of the Scottish referendum, Cameron further stoked English grievances against Scotland's attempted departure, and subsequently exploited fears of [SNP influence over a possible Miliband Labour government](#) during the 2015 general election campaign. Inevitably, that tiger has now devoured Cameron.

### The ties that bind

Despite the insurrectionist rhetoric, however, all we have seen so far in concrete terms is the prospect of the transfer of political power from one Eton-educated Tory to another. The British political elite remains as distant and out of touch as it ever was. But the departure of Cameron will be just the start of a process, not the end of one.

The grievances that fuel provincial populism – economic decline, globalisation, demographic change, pressure on services, disappointment with their own lives, fears for their children's futures – can never be addressed by the narrow market solutions favoured by Boris Johnson and his acolytes. Making a real difference to these people's lives would require a degree of state activism and redistributive economic policy that most of today's Tories cannot conceive of, let alone countenance.

Johnson's muted attempt to reach out to the Remain camp immediately after the result indicates that he senses the danger ahead. For, in less time than many probably anticipate, the angry citizens who voted Leave in the hope of a change in circumstances will realise they have been sold a dodgy bill of goods in order to transfer power from one bunch of toffs to another. They will ask why they remain in low-wage jobs, why their children still can't get on the housing ladder, why life remains insecure, and they will no longer have Europe to blame.

They will inevitably look closer to home for their scapegoats. When that happens, Johnson, Theresa May or whoever else becomes the next Conservative Party leader and prime minister later this year will find that the ties that bind us all have stretched painfully thin.