## BAGEHOT The death zone

Every party in British politics is in danger



L'UNNY THINGS happen to the human body above 26,000 feet I (8,000 metres). Brain cells die. Blood turns to thick red custard. Vessels in the eye spontaneously burst. Brain swelling can lead to coma or worse. Mountaineers call it "the death zone", and with good reason. In British politics the death zone is less visceral, but no less serious. Any party that spends too long in the 20s or below in the polls is in deep trouble. Usually only one major party is unlucky enough to be so disliked. Today, they all are.

Britain's main parties are remarkably unpopular. Labour sits at 26% in the polls on average, eight points below what was already the most efficient (or disproportionate) landslide victory in British electoral history. It is joined by the Conservatives, also on 26%, which is only a shade above their performance in the general election, itself a historic low. Nigel Farage's populist band Reform UK ticks up to 21%, which is enough to trigger excitable headlines but not enough to guarantee replacing the Liberal Democrats as Britain's third party, never mind usurp the Conservatives as an alternative party of government.

Each is a slip from falling into an electoral crevasse. First-pastthe-post is generous to the party on top and merciless to those beneath it, which have to scrap for every second of media coverage, every pound from donors and every inch of voter head space.

Strangely, few in Westminster seem concerned. In the Labour ranks, success has led to complacency. Polls are dismissed. The party commands a majority of 163 MPs and has at least four clear years of government before they face voters again. Yet clouds are already gathering in the valley, even if the view from the top—or from inside a ministerial car-looks splendid. Labour Together, a think-tank close to the leadership, believes the danger is losing voters to the right; others argue that the danger lurks to the party's left, with people drifting to the Greens. So far both camps are correct: Labour is bleeding support in all directions.

Similar denial afflicts the Conservatives. Tory MPs have been cheered by Labour's lousy start. Yet although Labour's support has bled, the Conservatives have barely benefited. A few months after their worst performance in a general election they remain more or less where they were: a historically unpopular party.

Some around the party are willing to face reality: "Many, many people came to hate the Conservative Party and will for a long time," wrote James Frayne in a report for the Centre for Policy Studies, another think-tank. Most, however, are so blase they notice only the unpopularity of Labour rather than their own. It is the same confused logic that leads people suffering hypothermia to strip naked and run into the snow.

If any party can be optimistic about life in the death zone, it is Reform UK. This is largely because it has the least to lose. The party has only five MPs and is barely five years old. It is still underresourced, with a handful of staff and little cash, akin to early-20th-century mountaineers having a crack at Everest in pyjamas and tweed. Even so, the latest iteration of Mr Farage's two-decade-long quest to blow apart British politics is arguably his most successful. One poll put Reform UK second, behind the Conservatives and above Labour.

In Mr Farage's telling Britain is on the brink of one of its oncea-century political ruptures, when a party is shifted from being a party of government to a straggler. For all his bullishness, Reform UK is just as close to death as glory. Such is the surreal workings of Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system, there is a minimal gap between Reform UK winning two, 20 or 200 seats at the next election; between a historic breakthrough or another chapter in Mr Farage's almost-made-it political life.

The only other time all major parties entered the death zone was in the pits of the Brexit years, in the spring and early summer of 2019. Theresa May's dying Conservative government tacked along in the low 20s. Jeremy Corbyn's historically unpopular Labour Party joined them. Mr Farage's outfit, then named the Brexit Party, peaked at roughly the same level. It was an extraordinary period, which was treated as such by everyone in Westminster. Commentators dragged out "King Lear" quotations to sum up the rage of the public: "I will do such things, / What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be / The terrors of the Earth."

In 2019 British politics managed to escape the death zone, but it was a destructive endeavour. Mrs May was removed and replaced by Boris Johnson, who purged his party, triggered a constitutional crisis and forced an election. It was a painful experience that few remember fondly, but it gave voters what they wanted: an end to the stasis of a hung parliament and Britain's departure from the European Union. At least the screaming stopped.

## Into thin air

This time a strange incuriosity has befallen Britain's political class. The voters are screaming just as loudly as they were in 2019, yet few are paying the calls any heed. Back then the cause of the discontent was obvious. Now the screams are harder to decipher. Are Britons angry about the state of the NHS, or the economy, or immigration? A good chunk of Westminster has decided to zip its tent and hope that the storm passes. Politics is relative, runs the logic. It is sometimes enough simply to be the least hated. Whoever does triumph, by default, will take a victory lap and claim death was never near.

Despite its fatal name, most climbers survive the death zone. Even the deadliest mountains kill only a small percentage of those who attempt to scale them. Nevertheless, preparation, caution and bravery are all needed to survive. Not many in Westminster are yet willing to accept that the stakes are that high. Forgetting the risks is the quickest way to die.