

**Nigel Farage and Zack Polanski: best of frenemies**  
***Britain's twin populists have a symbiotic relationship***  
***The Economist, March 5th 2026***

For 15 years British politics has been rocked by an insurgency on the populist right, led by Nigel Farage. Now it is also seeing an insurgency from the populist left. The Green Party, a fusty and largely irrelevant outfit until it was given a makeover by Zack Polanski, its self-styled “eco-populist” leader, scored a stunning victory on February 26th in a by-election in Gorton and Denton, in Manchester. Labour was pushed into third place in its heartland, behind Mr Farage’s Reform UK. Jointly these twin populists have just 13 MPs but poll higher than Labour and the Tories combined. In the by-election they won 69% of the vote. The trend will be replayed many times at local-government elections in May.

At first glance this looks like a simple story about the mutually loathing poles of radical left and right. In reality the dynamic is more complex, and a lot more dangerous. Though the Greens and Reform present themselves as opposites, they are in some ways similar. Because each fuels the other’s success, their relationship is symbiotic. Both share a strategic interest in supplanting the parties of the centre. A great day for Mr Polanski in Gorton and Denton meant a very good one for Mr Farage. Not rivals, but frenemies.

To their supporters that will sound absurd. Mr Polanski calls Mr Farage “a fascist”; Mr Farage says Mr Polanski is a “lunatic” supported by “all the heroin smokers”. On immigration, the Palestinians, transgender people, climate and much else they are vociferous opponents. In Gorton and Denton the Greens courted local Muslim voters; Mr Farage claimed the campaign had been “sectarian”: ie, somehow un-British.

But that cultural gulf is the point. The two parties share a project in pulling apart Labour’s fragile coalition of progressives and traditionalists. Nothing mobilises their supporters like the spectre of the other extreme, and declaring that they alone can keep it from power. Thus Mr Farage and Mr Polanski are eager to lock horns. The more young voters see Mr Polanski berating Mr Farage on Instagram, the better for them both.

It is the same among populists across Europe, but in Britain the incentives are amplified by the first-past-the-post electoral system. Mr Farage knows his path to office will be eased if the Greens do well, because small gains in their vote greatly reduce the notional majorities of Labour MPs in his target seats. Their voters have more in common than they think. Compared with supporters of mainstream parties, they earn less and are more likely to rent. Their politics reflect a loss of status. Many prospective Green voters have paid a lot for university degrees that turned out not to be the ticket to the middle-class jobs they imagined; many Reform supporters have lost the well-paying industrial work of their youth.

Both sets of voters are susceptible to zero-sum thinking. After two decades of stagnation, many doubt that the pie will grow much and are open to being told that someone else has taken too big a slice. Reform blames scrounging migrants. The Greens blame the rich. Both parties vow to raise living standards by squeezing their respective bogeymen. But their policies would make Britain poorer. Both are sceptical of multinationals, trade and building anything anywhere near anyone.

For the parties of the centre, the sensible response would be to offer policies to boost growth: making it easier to build, reforming welfare to encourage work, and so on. The snag is, such policies are often unpopular. And as populists lure away voters with simple, phoney cures for every ill, neither Labour nor the Tories seem to have the courage to be sensible.

**Britain is not ungovernable—it just needs better governance**  
***The Economist, May 14th 2026***

Less than two years ago Sir Keir Starmer was elected promising to save Britain from populism. As with Emmanuel Macron in France and Friedrich Merz in Germany, his mission was to show that the fruits of sober, competent policymaking are worth more than the empty promises of demagogues.

This week it became clear how abjectly Sir Keir has failed. A drubbing for Labour in elections for councils in England and parliaments in Scotland and Wales on May 7th has sparked a revolt in the parliamentary party. As we went to press, the prime minister was about to face at least one serious challenger for his job. It would be in Britain’s interest for him to go.

The moral for some who look at the miserable polling of Messrs Macron, Merz and Starmer—all decent men—is that European social democracies have become ungovernable. Caught between low growth,

high taxes and borrowing and the demand for more public spending, exhausted centrists seem incapable of bringing about change or seeing off the populist challenge from the right and the left. Nowhere more so than in post-Brexit Britain, which, with five heads of government in six years, has got through prime ministers almost as fast as Chelsea has replaced its managers. Larry, Number 10's chief mouser, has become a furry beacon of stability.

Yet Britain is not ungovernable. Sir Keir blames his problems on everybody else, but they should really be put down to that unfashionable quality in politics: "character". The counsel of despair which says Britain should cling to a lame duck for fear of something worse is a formula for the populist insurgency safety-minded centrists most want to avoid.

It is true that the prime minister has had a lot on his plate. However, as that parliamentary majority attests, Sir Keir had a chance to make a better fist of governing. Britain's institutions still function. Relations with Europe, for so long a drag on the economy, are now an opportunity for growth. So too, as Labour rightly spotted, are cutting red tape in planning and curbing unsustainable welfare.

Other countries, such as Australia, Canada and Norway, have faced headwinds and yet centrist parties there have survived and even thrived. A large part of the reason Britain has not joined them is Sir Keir himself. Even before he took power, he pinned his government down with manifesto commitments not to raise income taxes or VAT. His half-baked reforms were painful enough to alarm voters but too small to have a meaningful effect on the economy. The big stuff never materialised: no big tax reset, no brave welfare reform, no ambitious rapprochement with the EU. He talked about speeding up planning, but wavered as soon as he hit resistance.

Prime ministers need authority and clarity. Sir Keir, it turns out, has neither. He cannot articulate a vision. Nor is he grounded in one. Twenty-first century policymaking is so complicated that voters want to be able to trust that the prime minister has the instincts to appoint the right people, weigh the evidence and make sensible decisions. Yet voters have sniffed out what Sir Keir is made of. A YouGov poll since this month's elections finds that only 29% of them want him to stay in office. Panicky Labour MPs have become a rabble.

Jettisoning a prime minister carries risks. As the Conservatives showed, it is habit-forming. Labour could tack to the left, causing a panic in bond markets. If it learns the wrong lessons, a change in personnel alone could set Britain on an even worse path.

And yet the risks of Sir Keir staying on are greater—as the country could find if he sees off his challengers until the next crisis or the one after that. As a prime minister surviving against the will of many of his MPs, he too would be dragged left. In any case, whoever is prime minister, the scope for foolish left-wing policies will be limited by the bond markets, which have British borrowing on a tight leash. Labour leaders understand their party and the country need growth. A more important attribute today is the political skill to set that as a direction for the country and defend it. The promise of a leadership contest is that it will draw out the candidates who best meet that test.

Purrsonality test

Two paths now lie ahead: a chance of renewal or downward spiralling. Whoever takes over from Sir Keir will inherit an enviable majority, three more years in office and a loyal cat. The country's problems are fixable. British assets are cheap. Voters want change. True, Labour could succumb to more infighting, but this could also be the rock-bottom moment.

The alternative is dark. This weekend, a large crowd is expected in London's streets for Tommy Robinson, an agitator who talks of resisting an "Islamic invasion". Britain's deserved reputation as a tolerant, multicultural success story is showing cracks. Episodes of bigotry are growing, from antisemitism in the name of "Free Palestine" to Muslim-bashing in the name of "save British values". If the centre does not hold, the snake-oil sellers will win the next general election. That might really make Britain ungovernable.