



Fabian Society analysis paper

Stuck

How Labour is too weak to win, and too strong to die

Author: Andrew Harrop, General Secretary, Fabian Society

Date: 3rd January 2017

Facing the Future is the Fabian Society's programme on Labour's renewal. It brings together a broad range of voices to challenge the Labour Party to do better for the people who need it most. Through events, publications and research, we are ensuring that Labour has the fundamental debate that it needs on its purpose, organisation and ideas. Labour must make itself relevant for the 2020s and broaden its appeal to people who rejected it in 2015.

This paper, like all publications of the Fabian Society, represents not the collective views of the Society but only the views of the author. This publication may not be reproduced without express permission of the Fabian Society

Key points

The Labour Party is too weak to win the next election – whether it takes place in 2017 or 2020. But it is also too strong to be displaced as the UK's main party of opposition. When an election comes Labour may end up winning only 140 to 200 big city and ex-industrial constituencies, but it will have a platform from which to rebuild. On the other hand, if Labour's fortunes recover sooner, while there is no chance of a majority, the party might be able to gain sufficient MPs to govern in partnership with other parties. That should be Labour's goal.

- Only a little over half of Labour's 2015 voters say they support the party today. The starting point for any political fightback must be to regain the support of recent Labour voters.
- Labour's current poll rating (27 to 28 per cent) is slightly below its share of the GB vote at the 2010 election. But if this level of support were replicated at an election now – following Labour's Scottish wipeout - the party would win less than 200 seats, around 40 fewer than in 2015 and 70 fewer than in 2010 (with current constituency boundaries).
- Things could get even worse. At the next election Labour may win as little as 20 per cent of the GB vote because, when the party has been in opposition in the past, it has under-performed its mid-term polling by an average of 8 percentage points at the subsequent election.
- If Labour's vote plummets in this way, the party would win around 140 to 150 MPs. But the electoral system will create a firebreak for Labour and it will remain by far the largest opposition party. The party does not face oblivion and will be able to rebuild.
- The threat of Ukip is being exaggerated in some quarters. Even if Ukip was tied with Labour in votes cast the smaller party would only win a handful of MPs (the same is true of the Liberal Democrats). Since 2015, Ukip has lost twice as many votes to the Tories as it has gained from Labour.
- There are no easy answers to Labour's Brexit dilemma. Since 2015, the party has lost as many votes to the Liberal Democrats as it has to the two right-wing, pro-Brexit parties combined. But overall, Labour has lost four times as many votes from leave as remain supporters. Simultaneously it needs to *retain* people who backed remain and *regain* those who voted leave. The Conservatives and Lib Dems are both advancing by attracting new support from one side only. Labour has no choice but to reach out to people in both camps, by positioning itself in the middle of the newly dominant social/cultural axis of politics.
- Just like for the US Democrats, winning the popular vote is not enough for Labour. To win a majority of one the party needs to beat the Conservatives by a higher margin than it achieved at the time of its resounding 2001 victory - and secure over 3 million more votes than the Tories. Even before Labour's current problems, this was unlikely. It is currently unthinkable.
- But only 30 seats need to be gained for Labour to be able to govern in partnership with other centre left parties – a far more plausible goal. An English majority is also much more achievable than a UK majority. Labour must prepare itself to work in partnership, in an era of quasi-federal, multi-party politics.
- The proposed boundary changes are a distraction given Labour's other problems. It is just as hard to win a majority under the old boundaries as the proposed new ones – and in many possible election scenarios the 'penalty' from the new boundaries is only a handful of seats. The boundary review should only be a minor consideration when thinking about Labour's preferred timing for the next election.

Commentary: apocalypse soon?

The politics of 2016 may have been frenetic but now an uneasy calm has descended on the Labour party. The Corbynite left has won the big internal battles but it seems to have no roadmap for winning back lost voters. The rest of the parliamentary party is barely audible: in place of the sound and fury of Jeremy Corbyn's first 12 months, there is quietude, passivity and resignation. And on Brexit, the greatest political question for two generations, the party's position is muffled and inconsistent. This is the calm of stalemate, of insignificance, even of looming death.

Labour remains strong in urban pockets but is faring very badly in by-elections. If the opinion polls are any guide, it could soon cease to be a nationally competitive political force. In Scotland there is no sign of recovery. And in England and Wales the party is only matching the level it achieved at the 2010 election, even though mid-term polls normally favour Labour oppositions. Even if the party's numbers sink no further, at the next election it is on course to win under 200 seats for the first time since 1935.

Labour politicians need to do more to understand the nature of the threat. MPs in the British equivalent of America's 'rust belt' talk up the risk of Ukip. But Paul Nuttall will struggle to make inroads, as Labour majorities are mainly large where Ukip is a force. And whatever MPs' local anxieties, since 2010 Ukip has actually gained relatively few votes directly from Labour and is now losing supporters to the Conservatives. The real threat in marginal seats is that former Labour supporters will scatter in all directions, while the Tories reach out to everyone who voted Leave. Theresa May's simple electoral strategy is to be the party of Brexit and it is paying dividends.

The Conservatives won't mind that they are also losing some 'remain' voters, but for Labour there are no easy choices. The Tories and Ukip may be chasing Labour's 2 million leave voters. But the Liberal Democrats now have their sights on the party's 5 million remainers, and in the recent by-elections they've won plenty over. The Fabian Society's analysis shows that since the 2015 election Labour has lost more votes to 'remain' parties than to the right. So if Labour apes May or Nuttall it could easily do more harm than good.

This dilemma means that Labour cannot allow others to define UK politics as if it were split down the middle by a referendum vote. Scotland has proved where that leads. Labour MPs representing ex-industrial heartlands may feel that the country is severed in two when they see social conservatives at home and liberal urbanites in London. But, in truth, we are not a polarised nation of cosmopolitans and reactionaries. Most people are somewhere in between, and that's especially the case in marginal constituencies.

To find a way back, Labour must therefore become the party of this cultural 'middle'. Tony Blair once tried to own the 'centre ground' of the left-right economic axis. Now the party's goal must be to dominate the centre of the newly dominant social/cultural axis that runs between Blair's liberal internationalism and Trump's social authoritarianism. The party must plant its flag midway between these poles and seek to occupy as much space as possible, so that it can rebuild connections with people with all sorts of different backgrounds and worldviews, whatever they did at the referendum.

Labour needs to be the party for the millions of voters who were neither die-hard remainers nor leavers; neither Richmond Park global citizens nor Faragiste pub bores. In practice, that means starting with pavement politics in the suburbs and towns where Labour isn't winning, to show that the party is 'from here', not an unfamiliar somewhere else.

For the time being Labour has no realistic chance of winning an election outright. To win a majority of one the party will probably need to beat the Tories by more than in 2001; such was the scale of its Scottish meltdown. So a wounded Labour party will have to get used to the idea that it will need to work alongside others. But the party is not going to die either, because the quirks of the British

electoral system create a firebreak: even if Labour’s vote share plummets, the party will still have far more MPs than any other opposition party and a sufficient parliamentary platform to start to rebuild.

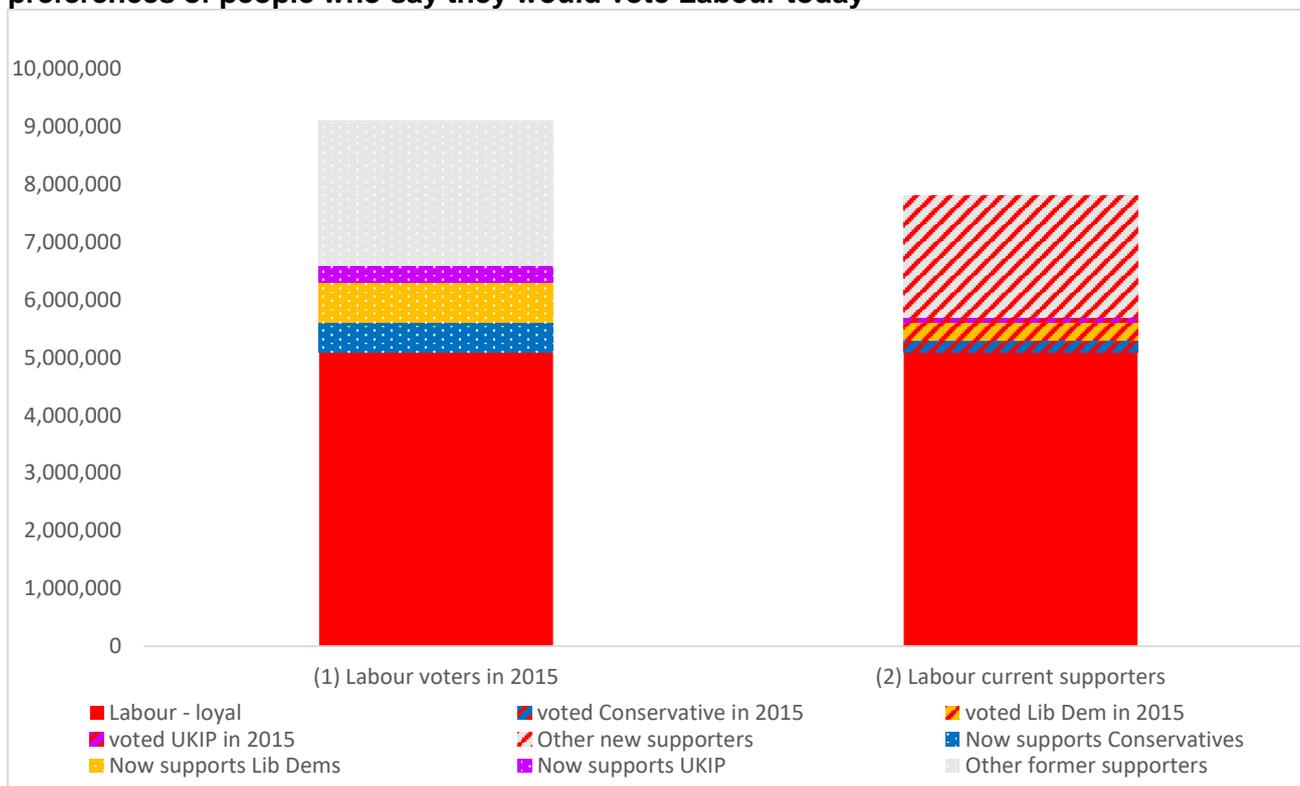
It is not a story of victory or death: Labour is too strong to be supplanted by another opposition party; and too weak to have any realistic chance of governing alone. But whenever an election comes the party must fight for every vote and every seat, because there is a huge difference between winning 150 and 250 MPs. The question now is whether the party can move forward, not back?

Analysis

1. Approaching half the people who voted Labour in 2015 no longer support the party

Labour’s problems today start with its own former voters. 4 million people who voted for the party in 2015 (44 per cent) would not vote Labour today.¹ Some of this group have switched their allegiance to other parties, but more than half say they are undecided or would not vote.

Figure 1: (1) Political preferences today of people who voted Labour in 2015; (2) past political preferences of people who say they would vote Labour today



Source: YouGov polls conducted from October to December 2016

That leaves only 5.1 million people as ‘loyal’ Labour voters, supporting the party at the last election and now (Figure 1). This is equivalent to around 18 per cent of the GB vote in a general election. By contrast the Conservatives retain three quarters of their 2015 voters; and Labour retained around 80 per cent of previous supporters at this point during the 2010-2015 parliament.²

Even unpopular parties gain voters because people chop and change in their political views. Labour currently has the support of an estimated 2.8 million people, over and above its 2015 voters. However, the party is gaining far fewer voters from other parties than it is losing to them. And since

it has lost so many of its previous voters, it is beginning from a lower base. ***The starting point for any political fightback must be to retain previous supporters.***

2. Outside Scotland Labour is now no less popular than in 2010, but it is set to win far fewer seats

An estimated 7.9 million people say they would vote Labour today, compared to more than 9 million people who voted for the party today in 2015 (figure 1). This equates to roughly 27 to 28 per cent of the GB vote, which is around two percentage points less than Labour secured at the 2010 election (29.7 per cent). This fall is entirely explained by Labour's Scottish collapse – in England and Wales its performance is similar to 2010.

However, in 2010 Labour 'over-performed' in terms of MPs and clung on to 258 out of 650 seats. That position has now reversed and on the basis of current polling, Labour would secure fewer than 200 seats (193 seats the model used by electoralcalculus.co.uk using polls from early December – figure 2).³ Models have been proved wrong in the past; however, the one quoted here *overstated* Labour's performance in 2015.⁴

Figure 2: Seat projections based on recent polling, reproduced from www.electoralcalculus.co.uk

| | 2015 result | | Today's polling | |
|------|--------------|-------|-----------------|-------|
| | Votes (GB %) | Seats | Votes (GB %) | Seats |
| LAB | 31.2 | 232 | 27.7 | 193 |
| CON | 37.8 | 331 | 42.6 | 370 |
| LD | 8.1 | 8 | 7.9 | 7 |
| Ukip | 12.9 | 1 | 11.7 | 1 |
| SNP | 4.9 | 56 | 4.7 | 56 |

Site accessed: mid December 2016

Labour's reversal of fortunes since 2010 is not explained by the relatively small decline in its overall share of the vote, but by two other reasons:

- (1) In Scotland, the rise of the SNP and the collapse of Labour (on current polling, the party would win zero seats, compared to 41 in 2010);
- (2) In England and Wales, the increase in the Conservative vote, at the expense of the Liberal Democrats (this explains why Labour is expected to lose 24 seats in England and Wales on this projection, compared to 2010).

Labour's Scottish collapse has already happened (the party only has one seat left to lose), but in 2015 Labour *gained* MPs in England and Wales - winning 231 seats - so it now stands to lose lots of MPs south of the border. ***On the basis of current polling, Labour can expect to lose around 40 seats at the next election – all but one in England and Wales.***

3. Things could get even worse for Labour

Past experience suggests that things could get a lot worse for Labour. For the last 50 years whenever the party has been in opposition, its mid-term poll ratings have been significantly higher than its subsequent general election performance (figure 3). During these periods Labour's polling has been an average of 8 percentage points above its share of the vote at the subsequent general election (whether you look at polls in the second year of the parliament; or in all non-election years).

Figure 3: Average Labour mid-term poll rating, compared to subsequent general election result

| | 70-74 | 79-83 | 83-87 | 87-92 | 92-97 | 10-15 | Av. |
|------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|------------|
| 2nd year of parliament | 11.5 | 18.3 | 5.3 | 3.2 | 1.1 | 9.7 | 8.2 |
| All mid-term years | 8.6 | 9.7 | 5.3 | 7.5 | 7 | 7.9 | 7.7 |

Source: www.markpack.org.uk/opinion-polls/

Some of this deviation has been due to polling errors, which may (or may not) have been corrected now; but there is also evidence of genuine shifts in political sentiment as elections have neared. Past trends may no longer be a guide, as we are living through unprecedented political times; but there is no particular evidence to suggest that the established pattern no longer applies.

On the contrary, the published YouGov data tables provide corroborating evidence to indicate that Labour's current polling numbers are 'soft'. Fabian calculations based on this data suggest that an estimated 2.1 million of those who say they would vote Labour today are not known to have voted for any of the big four parties in 2015 (figure 1). By contrast, only around 1.2 million of the Conservatives' new voters are not known to have voted for a top 4 party. Many of Labour's supporters are therefore new voters and previous non-voters. They could turn out to be fair-weather friends, who do not actually end up voting Labour - or voting at all.

Both historic trends and current polling suggests that Labour could secure a smaller share of the vote than mid-term opinion polls suggest. ***A plausible, if pessimistic, scenario is that Labour could be reduced to 20 per cent of the vote at the next election.***

4. If Labour's vote plummets the party will win fewer than 150 MPs at the next election, but the electoral system will create a 'firebreak'

The UK's odd electoral system is hurting Labour at the moment, but if the party's vote falls further it will come to Labour's rescue. If the party sinks to 20 per cent in the polls it could still see 140 to 150 MPs returned, because of the way that the main parties' votes are likely to be distributed at constituency level.

Figure 4 illustrates three scenarios in which Labour is reduced to 20 per cent of the vote, with the main beneficiary being the Conservatives, the Lib Dems and Ukip respectively. Again the seat projections are taken from www.electoralcalculus.co.uk.

Figure 4: Labour meltdown: possible scenarios

| | 1. Tory surge | | 2. Lib Dem surge | | 3. Ukip surge | |
|------|---------------|-------|------------------|-------|---------------|-------|
| | Votes (%) | Seats | Votes (%) | Seats | Votes (%) | Seats |
| LAB | 20 | 140 | 20 | 143 | 20 | 149 |
| CON | 45 | 418 | 42 | 404 | 42 | 403 |
| LD | 12 | 12 | 20 | 26 | 7 | 8 |
| Ukip | 12 | 0 | 7 | 0 | 20 | 10 |

Source: www.electoralcalculus.co.uk

Labour's performance is pretty similar in all three cases. And the projections indicate that there is little threat of Ukip or the Lib Dems taking a significant number of seats from Labour. Even if one of the smaller parties *matched* Labour in share of the vote, it would only be able to take a handful of seats from Labour.

In the scenario where Labour and the Lib Dems are tied, with 20 per cent of the vote each, the Lib Dems would win 26 seats (including some from the Conservatives). In the equivalent scenario where Labour and Ukip are tied on 20 per cent of the vote, Ukip would end with only 10 seats. This

would actually be the 'least bad' scenario for a collapse in the Labour vote. The worst scenario is for Labour to perform very badly without either smaller rival doing well, because in that case more votes would go to the Tories, who are Labour's main rival in most seats.

These findings suggest that many within Labour are significantly over-stating the chances of a Ukip breakthrough, in particular. In each of the three meltdown scenarios Labour would lose far more seats to the Conservatives than to any smaller rival; and Labour would end up with far more seats than any insurgent party that managed to match it in terms of votes. Of course, these projections are based on the nationwide share of the vote and local factors could lead to Labour losing the odd extra seat. But the overall pattern is clear.

A disastrous election result for Labour would see the party lose around 90 MPs, but it would still be the second largest party by some margin with sufficient MPs to form the platform for future recovery. The Lib Dems or Ukip could only breakthrough if they won many more votes than Labour nationally.

5. There is no easy answer to Labour's Brexit dilemma

Labour's electoral problems are not just about numbers, because the party needs to keep together an increasingly diverse coalition of voters. While current and recent Labour supporters can broadly agree on a centre-left economic agenda, they have divergent attitudes on the increasingly dominant social/cultural political axis. Reaching out to both social conservatives and social liberals is likely to prove challenging for as long as Brexit dominates British politics.

If current opinion polls were replicated in an election today, almost all the seats Labour would lose would fall to the Conservatives (see page 5). But Labour would lose the most votes to the Liberal Democrats, something that went unremarked upon until the Richmond Park by-election.

Figure 5: Fabian Society estimates for the net flow of voters between political parties between the 2015 general election and today

| | Ukip | Lib Dem | Conservative |
|--------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|
| Labour | 200,000 L→U | 400,000 L→LD | 200,000 L→C |
| Conservative | 400,000 U→C | 100,000 LD→C | |
| Lib Dem | No net change | | |

Source: YouGov polls conducted from October to December 2016

Fabian Society estimates based on published YouGov data tables indicate that since the 2015 election, Labour has lost around 400,000 votes to the Lib Dems; and only around 200,000 each to the Conservatives and Ukip (figure 5). It seems that Labour is equally vulnerable to losing support to another liberal-minded, pro-European party; and to the socially conservative, Euro-sceptic parties.

This evidence also shows, once again, that the threat Ukip poses to Labour may be being exaggerated. Recent polling indicates that, since 2015, Labour has lost fewer votes to Ukip than to either the Lib Dems or the Conservatives. Meanwhile Ukip has lost twice as many votes to the Tories as it has gained from Labour. This suggests that Ukip will be unable to mount a serious challenge to Labour in more than a handful of seats (where shifts in local voting intentions deviate sharply from the national pattern).

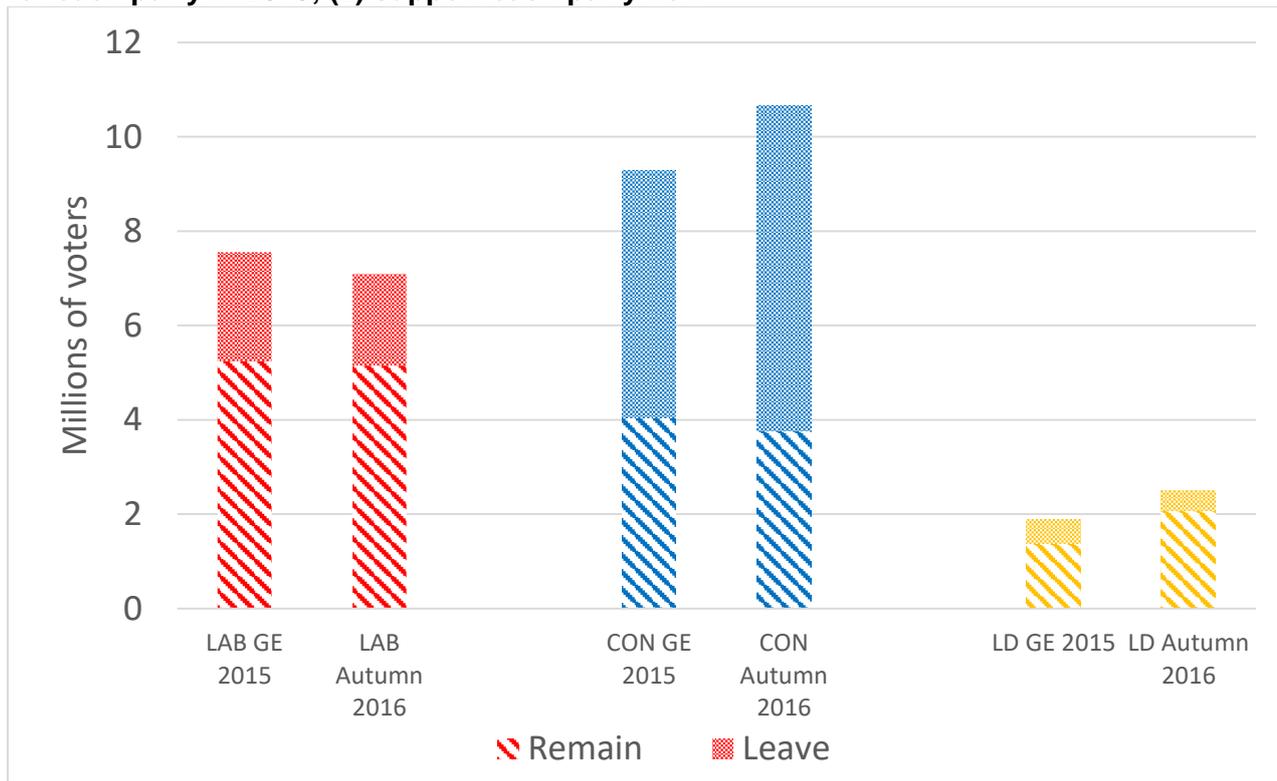
The grim reality is that Labour is losing votes to all the major parties; while the Tories are gaining support from them all. In Labour-Conservative marginal seats this will translate into widespread losses for Labour, even though the party is losing relatively few votes directly to the Tories.

That's not the end of the story, however. Labour may be losing votes to the main pro and anti EU parties in equal measure. But it is still doing far better among people who backed 'remain' than

those who voted 'leave'. Since 2015 we estimate that the party has lost around 400,000 votes among people who backed leave, and only 100,000 votes among people who voted remain (ie the 'remain' supporters who are switching from Labour to the Lib Dems are being replaced by other remain voters).⁵

Labour's 2015 voters were heavily pro-remain, but the loss of 'leave' votes since then means that its current supporters are even more pro-EU (only a quarter of this group voted leave). This exposes Labour's Brexit dilemma: To *regain* recently lost supporters, it needs to appeal to leave voters. But to *retain* its existing supporters it needs to appeal to remain voters.

Figure 6: Fabian Society estimates for the number of leave and remain voters who (1) voted for each party in 2015; (2) support each party now



Source: YouGov polls conducted on 23 June 2016 and from October to December 2016

To make matters worse this dilemma is unique to Labour and other parties are being rewarded for the positions they are taking on Brexit. Compared to 2015, the Lib Dems have gained a lot more new votes from remain supporters (700,000 votes) than they have lost from leave supporters (100,000 votes). The Tories are doing even better, the other way round. They are scooping up leave votes from all the other big parties and have gained 1.6 million leave votes, while spilling 300,000 remain votes. This vindicates Theresa May's electoral strategy of 'Brexit means Brexit'.

Labour has no choice but to appeal to 'leave' and 'remain' voters, by seeking to occupy the centre of the newly dominant social/cultural axis of politics.

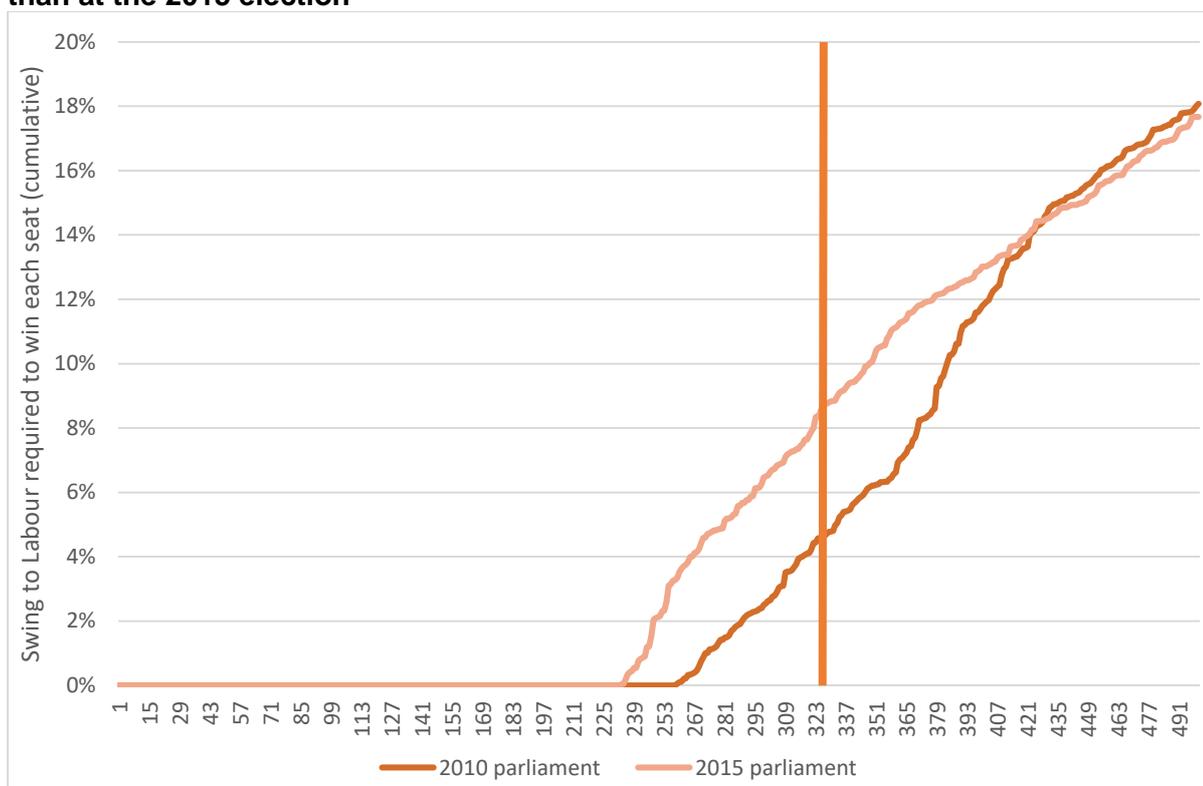
6. An outright Labour victory is now virtually unthinkable, so partnerships will need to be considered

Labour faced a huge electoral challenge even before the party chose a left-populist leader or Brexit divided its electoral coalition. The electoral map created by the 2015 election threw up massive

problems for the party, as the Fabian Society report [The Mountain to Climb](#) made clear in summer 2015.

Today Labour needs to win 94 seats to win a majority of one (compared to 68 before the last election). But this actually understates how much harder Labour’s task has become. Not only does the party need to win more seats, there are also fewer competitive marginal constituencies compared to previous electoral cycles (just 48 seats can be won with a 5 percentage point swing from the incumbent to Labour, compared to 74 in the last parliament). This is partly due to Conservative majorities being higher than before in England and Wales. But it is also because, in Scotland, the SNP are way ahead in most of the seats they hold (only 2 of those 48 marginal seats are in Scotland). This is a critical issue for Scottish Labour: not only does the party have only one MP, but it will need a huge turnaround in support to gain many more.

Figure 7: Labour’s ‘mountain to climb’ towards winning a majority is both higher and steeper than at the 2015 election



Source: House of Commons, Electoral Commission

At the next election Labour will need a swing of 8.7 per cent to secure the ‘winning post’ constituency required for a majority of one (figure 7). By contrast at the 2015 election the party needed a swing of 4.6 per cent. In other words, Labour is around twice as far from victory as it was in the run up to 2015. As figure 7 shows, with fewer Labour seats to start with and fewer competitive marginals, the mountain Labour has to climb is both higher and steeper.

Even without Labour’s current problems, climbing this mountain in a single electoral cycle would have been highly unlikely. Securing a swing of 9 percentage points in marginal seats implies that Labour needs to beat the Conservatives by 11 points in the GB share of the vote (for example 40 per cent v 29 per cent). This is equivalent to a lead of well over 3 million votes, so the party faces the same fate as Hillary Clinton: just winning the popular vote is not enough. For comparison, Labour led the Tories by 13 points in 1997 and by 9 points in 2001. So if Labour and the Conservatives both secured the same share of the GB vote as they did in 2001, Labour would probably fail to win a majority.

Labour must not despair however, because turning the Conservatives out of power is more feasible. As *The Mountain to Climb* explained, it is much more plausible to imagine a group of anti-Conservative parties securing sufficient votes to form a governing alliance than for Labour to govern alone – although even this would still require a very large reversal in Labour’s present fortunes. For example, Labour, the SNP and the Lib Dems would secure a shared majority if they gained 30 seats between them (but not from each other). This could be achieved if there was a swing away from the Conservatives of around 3 percentage points (to give Labour 24 gains and the Lib Dems 6 gains). This is consistent with Labour and the Conservatives being tied in share of the vote, which would also give Labour the moral authority to assert the right to govern.⁶

Another intermediate goal would be to win a majority in England or in England and Wales, which would enable Labour to legislate under the terms of ‘English Votes for English Laws’. Reaching this milestone would help ward off concerns about undue SNP influence, in the context of Labour requiring SNP support to maintain a UK majority. The two scenarios are:

- England and Wales majority – 56 gains (5.7 per cent swing, 5 point Labour GB lead)
- England majority – 61 gains (6.5 per cent swing, 6.5 point Labour GB lead)

All these possibilities may sound rather theoretical, considering how the gap between Labour and the Conservatives has widened sharply since the last election, not closed. But we are living through very fluid political times. By 2020 Labour and the Conservatives could each face very different political contexts.

If these are the ‘best case’ scenarios for what might be conceivable at the next election, then there are significant implications for how Labour campaigns. First, the party will have to think much more about its relationship with the other centre left parties and how it talks about the possibility of partnerships in the run up to an election. Second, it will need to develop a clear manifesto for England and seek a mandate for an English legislative agenda, whatever the UK-wide outcome. ***Labour needs to prepare itself to work in partnership, in an age of quasi-federal, multi-party politics.***

7. The proposed boundary changes are a distraction, given Labour’s other problems

The Labour Party has expended a huge amount of energy opposing the proposed boundary changes, and there is still a chance they will not be implemented because they are being resisted by Tory backbenchers too. However, compared to the party’s other electoral challenges, the proposed changes are a sideshow.

The new boundaries are mainly unpopular with politicians because they reduce the overall number of MPs from 650 to 600. This is significant for Labour, as it could potentially deprive the party of strong parliamentarians upon whom it will depend in future to rebuild. But the reforms will not significantly weaken Labour’s voting strength in the shrunken House of Commons – certainly when compared to all the other threats the party faces. This becomes clear when you examine the differences between the current and proposed constituencies in three contexts:

(a) ‘Replaying’ the 2015 election: Electoral analysts have estimated how the parties would have performed if the 2015 election had been contested on the proposed new boundaries. Three estimates put Labour on between 200 and 205 out of 600 seats.⁷ This is bad news for Labour as its actual result (232 out of 650 seats) is equivalent to 214 MPs in a house of 600. But the loss of around 10-15 MPs as a result of the boundary changes is nothing compared to the potential election losses the party faces on the existing boundaries, even if it sinks no lower than its current polling.

(b) Winning a majority: The winning line is not really further away from Labour with the proposed new constituencies. At present the party need to gain 94 seats out of 650 to win a majority of one; under the proposed boundaries it will need to gain 98 out of 600 (using the projections of www.ukpollingreport.co.uk). But by a quirk of the re-districting process the electoral swing required for Labour to win a majority would be lower under the new boundaries than the old:⁸

- **Current boundaries:** Labour's 94th target seat (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) requires an 8.7 per cent swing to overturn a majority of almost 10,000.
- **Proposed boundaries:** Labour's 98th target (the proposed seat of Shipley) requires an 8.3 per cent swing to overturn a notional majority of around 9,250

(c) Scenarios for the next election: Electoral models also indicate that the proposed boundary changes would have limited impact on the outcome of an election taking place today (either if the vote share replicated current polling; or if Labour did considerably worse than that). For example, the model used by www.electoralcalculus.co.uk produces the following results:

- **Votes cast reflect current polling:** Labour suffers a 4 seat penalty as a result of the boundary changes (winning 29.8 per cent of MPs with current boundaries; 29.2 per cent with proposed boundaries)
- **Labour meltdown/Tory surge:** Labour suffers a 5 seat penalty as a result of boundary changes (21.5 per cent of MPs with current boundaries; 20.7 per cent with proposed boundaries)

Labour can be considered to have escaped relatively unscathed from the current boundary proposals (which will be revised following consultation). In a tight election the fairly small overall effects of the proposed changes would harm Labour at the margin; but as things stand the party is likely to lose many more seats for other reasons. If there is any prospect of Labour's support growing in coming years, the party would be wrong to favour an early election on the old boundaries over a later election on new ones. ***The boundary review should only be a minor consideration when thinking about Labour's preferred timing for the next election.***

Notes

¹ Methodology note: These estimates are calculated using published data tables from YouGov polls conducted between October and December 2016 (7 polls, combined sample of 11,680). Internet pollsters like YouGov use standing panels of survey respondents which means they have accurate information on people's past voting behaviour (except in cases where respondents are new to the panel). The Fabian Society's estimate for the number of voters supporting each party (in 2015 and today) was calculated by scaling up the weighted number of YouGov respondents who said they voted for the four main GB parties in 2015, to match the number of actual votes cast for those parties. There are limitations to this methodology, but these impact the results for all the parties.

² 81 per cent - YouGov poll, 15-16 December 2011
http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/66o7mthsox/Sunday%20Times%20Results%20111216%20VI%20and%20Trackers.pdf

³ These sort of estimates assume that national polling will play out in similar ways across all constituencies (with separate modelling for Scotland). This is a sensible means of projecting overall seat numbers, as opposed to the result in individual constituencies, where modelling is much more uncertain.

⁴ http://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/trackrecord_15errors.html

⁵ Methodology note: The estimates for the number of current party supporters who voted remain and leave uses the methodology described in note 1. The estimates for the number of 2015 party supporters who voted remain and leave are calculated using a YouGov poll conducted on 23rd June (sample: 4,772), scaled up to the number of people who voted in the referendum. This poll slightly under-stated the level of leave support and over-stated remain support, which means each party would in reality have had slightly more leave supporters. Our calculation of the number of Leave voters Labour has lost since 2015 is therefore an under-estimate.

⁶ For Labour and the Conservatives to be tied in terms of seats, Labour would need to be around 3 percentage points ahead in terms of votes (ie almost 1 million votes ahead).

⁷ <http://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/boundaries2018.html> <https://www.ncpolitics.uk/2016/09/first-look-at-the-boundary-review.html/> <http://ukpollingreport.co.uk/blog/archives/category/boundary-review>

⁸ This is because there are proportionately fewer Scottish seats, where Labour is a long way behind