



Philip Collins
Writer

Philip Collins is a columnist for *The Times* and an Associate Editor of *Prospect* magazine. He was Chief Speech Writer to Prime Minister Tony Blair in 10 Downing Street between 2004 and 2007 and has subsequently written keynote speeches for a range of senior politicians, leaders of charities and NGOs and Chief Executive Officers. Mr Collins is the author of *The Art of Speeches and Presentations* and pioneered the analysis of major speeches in *The Times*.



The future of politics

British politics would have been such fun if the Gang of Four had broken the mould. In 1967 the Labour MP Tom Driberg enlisted Allen Ginsberg to introduce him to Mick Jagger whom Driberg thought could bring in the youth vote. Jagger was sceptical: "I mean, I don't exactly see myself scrutinising the Water Works Bill inch by inch, if you know what I mean".

At one of their meetings, at the Gay Hussar, Driberg brought along WH Auden who proceeded to ruin the evening by asking Marianne Faithfull if she had ever smuggled drugs into the country in her bottom. Their hopes ended when Keith Richards declared the new party the worst idea he had ever heard in his life.

The British political system is indeed hostile to new parties. In 2017, the Conservatives and Labour between them polled 82.4 per cent of the vote. There would seem to be no vacancy and the history of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) casts a long shadow. The stated objective of the SDP was to break British politics apart. It never happened and the SDP episode has since been turned into a parable that teaches us the impossibility of third-party politics in Britain.

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The case against is formidable. Voters are grouped into loyal party bands. The electoral system magnifies victory and defeat so the fate of the SDP – which won only 23 seats on 25% of the vote – is unavoidable. Yet the case may not now be as strong as all that. In 1981, the Thatcher administration had a certain brutal competence which cannot be said of the today's Tory party. The Labour was then,

as it is now, led from its left but the left now has a much stronger grip on the party.

The backdrop is also completely different. In 1981 economic growth was about to climb and the Tories, only four years into their term in office, entered the 1983 election with rising living standards. By 2022, a government which has been in office for 12 years will be vulnerable to a fragile economy. Half the electorate say that no party speaks for them and that they would consider switching their vote if there were a credible third option available. More than that say no party speaks for them. The two parties are splintering at the same time. Labour has taken a decisive step to the left while the Tories are slowly being suffocated by Brexit. Besides, these days it is so much easier to gather people digitally, to enlist support and funding online, to reach members at low cost.

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That volatility has been dramatically increased by the European referendum of June 2016. Think too of the still under-reported but astonishing collapse of the Labour party in Scotland. The slow decline of class voting in Britain suddenly accelerated between 2015 and 2017. In the

general election last June, income level did not help to predict how someone would vote. The Conservatives, for the first time, did better among the working class than Labour. The best way to predict political affiliation is now to ask people whether they think immigration is largely a force for good, or if they believe that globalisation has, on balance, helped the nation prosper or not. The answer to these questions predicted both the referendum and the 2017 election.

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And there is where it starts to get interesting because the new patterns are explicitly not like 1981. People attached to an open cultural message all live close together. That means that 25% of the vote could yield a lot more than 23 seats. Britain has not given the Conservatives a working majority for 30 years. Apart from its leader non grata Blair, Labour has not won a victory of any description for 44 years. This is not two-party politics, it is none-of-the-above party politics.

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So just imagine a new party did exist which was fiscally moderate, pro-enterprise with a strong account of social justice. It was pro-competition and intent on shifting the burden of taxation from income to wealth. It talked about automation and housing. It would regret Brexit but seek to make the best of it. Imagine this party was led by a credible prime minister such as Ruth Davidson, David Miliband or Chuka Ummuna. Then ask yourself: would you be tempted to vote for this party yourself? Do you not think it might do rather well? Maybe it is time to start again.

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