

'We can sniff Starmmer's fear of Farage' say voters as they back winter fuel U-turn and insist two-child benefit cap must stay



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MRS MERTON, the comic interviewer created by the late Caroline Aherne, famously asked Debbie McGee what first attracted her to the millionaire Paul Daniels. In the same satirical spirit, voters have been wondering what it was about the Reform party's surge in the local elections that prompted Keir Starmer to tighten his immigration policy and row back on cuts to the winter fuel allowance.

Some welcome the winter fuel reversal and even give Labour some credit for listening and learning. More sceptical voters, of whom there are plenty, see a weak Government that can't make a decision and stick to it. Some wonder which taxes will rise to pay for the U-turn.

On all sides, the link between Labour's plummeting popularity and the winter fuel climbdown is obvious (in my research, Starmer's explanation that his newfound largesse was the result of an improving economy just made people laugh). 'You've kind of gotta sniff a bit of desperation,' one 2024 Labour voter told us.

The same is true of Starmer's recent conversion to tighter immigration controls, with promises of stricter education and language requirements and a longer wait for settled status.

On this issue, voters are, if anything, even more doubtful – for at least three reasons.

First, they don't think he means it: the human rights lawyer and free-movement advocate has not suddenly seen the merits of firm border control ('If that was what you truly believe, it should have been on the table months ago,' a Reform supporter said).

Second, they don't think it will happen: my poll found only just over a quarter of all voters think Labour would succeed in cutting immigration numbers, even if it wanted to – which most think it

...AND GUESS WHO THEY THINK WILL BE OUR NEXT PM

VOTE SHARE

Reform UK	27%
Labour	22%
Conservative	19%
Lib Dem	13%
Greens	13%
Others	6%

WHAT SHOULD RACHEL REEVES DO TO BALANCE THE BOOKS?

Raise taxes	21%
Cut spending	37%
Increase borrowing	12%

WHAT SHOULD STARMER DO ABOUT THE WINTER FUEL ALLOWANCE?

Bring it back for all pensioners	30%
Bring it back for more pensioners	40%
Keep it for only the poorest	21%

SHOULD CHILD BENEFITS BE LIMITED TO TWO CHILDREN?

Yes	63%
No	22%

WHY IS STARMER TIGHTENING IMMIGRATION RULES?

He fears losing votes	72%
He thinks it's right	17%

WOULD DITCHING BADENOCH AS TORY LEADER IMPROVE THE PARTY'S ELECTORAL PROSPECTS?

Yes	25%
No	45%

WHICH PARTY REPRESENTS THE BIGGEST THREAT TO LABOUR AT THE NEXT ELECTION?

Reform	58%
Conservative	7%

BEST PRIME MINISTER

Starmer	30%
Farage	23%
Badenoch	7%

LEADERS MOST LIKELY TO BE IN PLACE AT THE NEXT ELECTION

Farage	62%
Starmer	26%
Badenoch	8%

MOST LIKELY TO BE PM AFTER THE ELECTION

Farage	25%
Starmer	18%
Badenoch	3%



doesn't. Third, they think he's aiming at the wrong target.

As my poll also showed, people care much more about illegal migration, and the vast hotel costs that follow, than about those

'Two-child benefit limit is issue of fairness'

coming here legitimately to work. Some worry that Starmer's new rules will make it harder to recruit, especially in crucial areas such as the care sector, even as migrants arrive on our beaches in record-breaking numbers.

In a double blow for Starmer, the people who take his new immigration rhetoric most seriously are the ones who like it least, often inside his own party.

Most of them don't think he means it either, but some long-standing Labour voters find it profoundly depressing that the Prime Minister seems willing, as they see it, to pander to the Right.

Many found his warning that Britain risked becoming an 'island of strangers' particularly worrying.

'When you're quoting Enoch Powell, I draw a line at that,' one told us last week.

Evidently aware of these tensions, Labour figures are dangling the prospect of an end to the rule under which families can only claim child-related benefits for up to two children.

This would please the Left and many party activists, but infuriate rather more than that. In my poll, most Labour voters backed the two-child benefit limit, while Conservatives and Reform voters did so overwhelmingly.

They see it as an issue of fairness: 'I've got six children and I agree with the cap, because all the extra children I had, I've paid for,' one participant put it.

These debates underline the dilemmas facing Chancellor Rachel Reeves as she prepares to unveil her spending review on Wednesday. With the economy struggling to grow under the weight of her extra taxes and regulations, she faces difficult choices

over how to maintain public services – and the Government's new commitments on defence – while sticking to her fiscal rules. I found voters tend to want her to balance the books by controlling spending rather than raising taxes, but think she will do the opposite.

Starmer has tried to divert attention from Labour's troubles by highlighting the contradictions in

'Reform supporters want direction change'

his opponents' plans. It is certainly true that Nigel Farage is offering simultaneously to slash taxes and boost spending – not least by scrapping the two-child benefit cap. But these attacks on Reform slightly miss the point.

Those drawn to the party know its policies are a work in progress; it is the change of direction they want to see. They want a government that takes them seriously and puts Britain first. They won't

be fact-checked into submission. More interesting is Starmer's acknowledgment that Reform is now Labour's chief opponent – a view shared by voters of all parties. Strikingly, my poll found Farage is considered the most likely of the current leaders to be PM after the next election.

This is not good news for Kemi Badenoch. Most in my poll expected her to be swapped out before the election. This is not because it would be a good thing or would help the Tories' chances, but because that's what they believe the party does.

No Tory leader has served a full term since David Cameron. The leadership circus has long been part of the Conservatives' problem. Another round would signal to many potential supporters that the party is not serious.

And with Labour in trouble and Reform promising whatever it pleases, seriousness is above all what the Tories need to prove.

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