

Kemi is closing in on Nigel, says poll

Yet Reform and Tories together are level with the horror coalition of parties on Left



By **GLEN OWEN**
POLITICAL EDITOR

KEMI Badenoch is celebrating a Christmas poll bounce after the Conservatives closed the gap with Nigel Farage's Reform UK to just three points. The end-of-year survey puts Ms Badenoch's party on 22 per cent – up from 20 per cent a month ago – suggesting that her improved Commons performances and fresh policy ideas are starting to 'cut through' to voters. Reform has dropped to 25 per cent. The analysis, by former Conservative deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft, highlights the febrile state of Right-wing politics. In the equivalent survey a month ago, Reform UK enjoyed a seven-point lead, a margin which could have put Mr Farage within striking distance of Downing Street. But under these latest figures, his chances of becoming prime minister would rely on a deal with the Tories. Labour is languishing in fourth place, a point behind Zack Polanski's Greens. It means that unless Labour manages to improve its performance, the

'Quelled disquiet by putting on assured public performances'

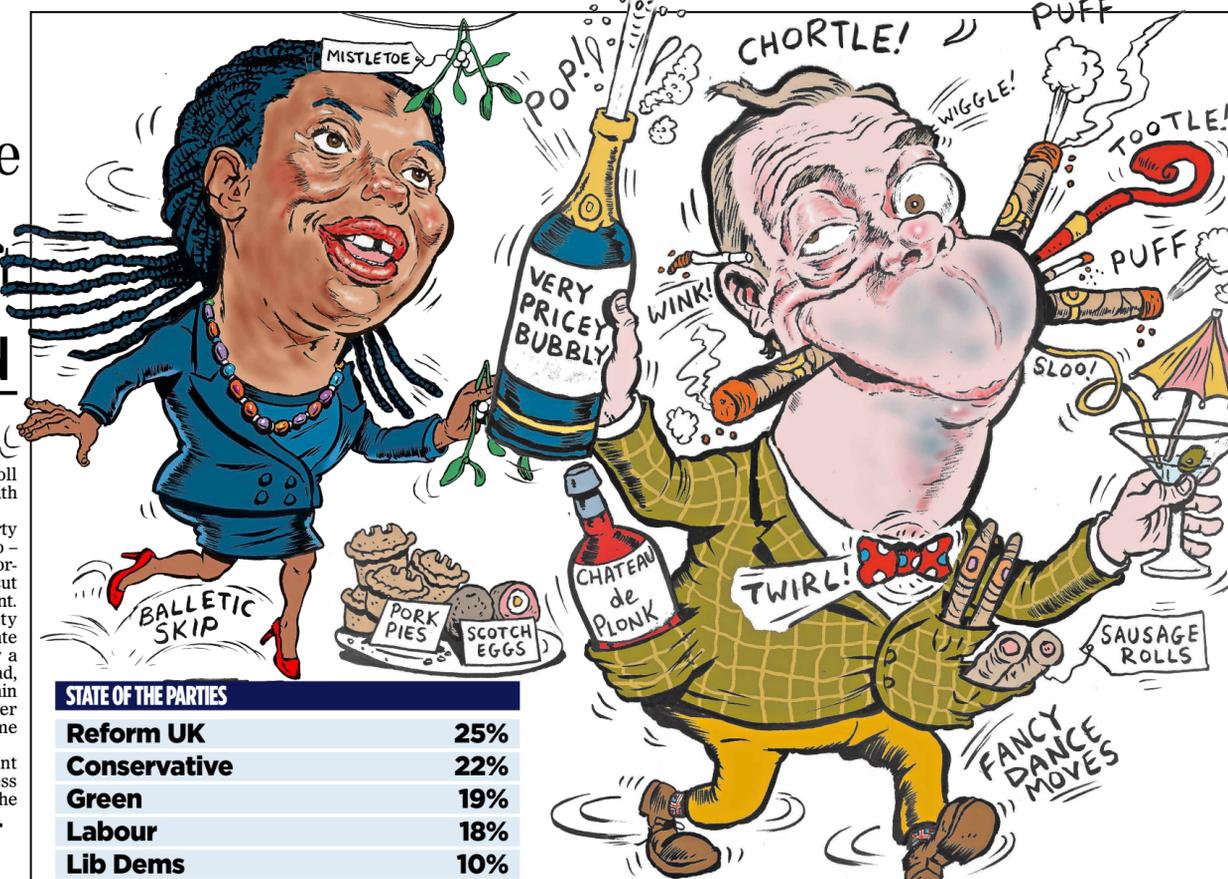
party's hopes of returning to No10 would rest on a Leftist coalition with the Greens and the Lib Dems. Aggregating individual party scores, such a union would command the support of 47 per cent of voters – the same as the combined support for Tories and Reform. It means that if the Right fails to unite, the Left could have a clear path to continued power. Ms Badenoch has managed to quell some of the disquiet on her backbenches in recent weeks by putting in more assured public performances. She has highlighted the disarray in Sir Keir Starmer's Government and started to set out a more coherent policy package, including the abolition of stamp duty and the scrapping of the ban on the sale of new petrol and diesel cars after 2030. By contrast, doubts have started to creep in among voters about whether Reform can move beyond the 'Nigel Farage show' to become an effective party of Government. When voters were asked whether Mr Farage has enough talented people to form an administration, only 17 per cent thought that he did, while 60 per cent did not. Disillusionment with the Government has left voters itching for an election. A total of 39 per cent of people would like a ballot next year, compared with 26 per cent who prefer to wait until 2029, the latest point it can be legally held. Die-hard Labour voters want to wait to give the party a chance to arrest its slump in popularity. Half its supporters want the Government to cling on until the end of the

five-year term, while just 17 per cent want an election next year. Many Labour supporters cling to the belief that a new leader such as Andy Burnham, Wes Streeting or Angela Rayner could turn their fortunes around. But while 51 per cent of Labour voters would like Ms Rayner back in Cabinet following her resignation for underpaying stamp duty, only 26 per cent of general voters agree. And they

think she would make a worse prime minister than Sir Keir. Mr Farage's lead in the polls might be slipping, but he dominates the rankings in the festive element of the survey. He comes top when people are asked which party leader they would most like to spend New Year's Eve with. He is also 'most likely to hide in the pub until Christmas lunch is ready', 'most likely to fall asleep in front of the TV after lunch'

front of the TV after lunch', 'most likely to burn the lunch', 'most likely to get into an argument over lunch' and 'most likely to do something embarrassing at the office party'. Sir Keir, however, is 'most likely to make a boring speech at a Christmas party' and 'most likely to sneak away from a get-together to do some work', while Ms Badenoch is 'most likely to help

clear up after Christmas lunch' and was the most popular choice for a kiss under the mistletoe. Casting a shadow over Christmas, however, is the economy. In total, 38 per cent of people say that they will have less money to spend on presents this year. Only 11 per cent say that they will be in a position to be more generous. A total of 5,195 voters were polled from December 11 to 15.



STATE OF THE PARTIES	
Reform UK	25%
Conservative	22%
Green	19%
Labour	18%
Lib Dems	10%

WHICH PARTY LEADER...

- Would you most like to spend New Year's Eve with?**
Nigel Farage
- Is most likely to hide in the pub until lunch is ready?**
Nigel Farage
- Would you like to kiss under the mistletoe?**
Kemi Badenoch

- Is most likely to make a boring speech at a Christmas party?**
Sir Keir Starmer
- Is most likely to insist on playing party games?**
Sir Ed Davey
- Is most likely to watch Channel 4's Alternative Christmas Message?**
Zack Polanski
- Most likely to fall asleep in front of the TV after lunch?**
Nigel Farage

WHERE DO YOU PICTURE STARMER HOLDING HIS CHRISTMAS PARTY?

At a Holiday Inn off the M6 motorway

WILL YOU HAVE MORE OR LESS TO SPEND ON CHRISTMAS PRESENTS THIS YEAR?

More 11%
Less 38%



SHOULD STARMER BRING ANGELA RAYNER BACK INTO THE CABINET?

Yes 26%
No 57%

SHOULD STARMER BRING BACK ANGELA RAYNER? (LABOUR VOTERS)

Yes 51%
No 35%

WOULD RAYNER BE BETTER OR WORSE AS PM THAN STARMER?

Better 14%
Worse 33%

WHEN DO YOU WANT THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION TO BE HELD?

2026 39%
2027 8%
2028 8%
2029 26%

WHEN DO YOU WANT THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION TO BE HELD? (LABOUR VOTERS)

2026 17%
2029 50%

DOES NIGEL FARAGE HAVE ENOUGH TALENTED PEOPLE TO FORM A GOVERNMENT?

Yes 17%
No 60%



POLLSTERS ask a lot of daft questions, especially at Christmas. The fact that (as I found last week) voters think Labour's office party would be a dull event in a Holiday Inn off the M6, that it would have a row over whether to put flags on the cakes, that Keir Starmer would be the leader most likely to make a boring speech at a festive gathering – and that Labour might not celebrate Christmas at all since it seems to hate our traditions – might not on the face of it add much to the sum of human knowledge.

But it tells us quite a lot about the state the Government finds itself in. My first poll of 2025 put Labour comfortably in first place. This month we find it in a sportsmanlike fourth position, behind Reform, the Conservatives and the Greens.

It is not hard to trace the reasons for its decline. Winter fuel cuts, failure to control illegal migration and its consequences, a stagnating economy, the pursuit of Net Zero over affordable energy, two-tier policing, sinister proposals such as compulsory digital ID and restricting trial by jury, and a huge increase in taxes with nothing whatever to show for it have all taken their toll.

Looking back at some of Labour's recent decisions, which almost seem calculated to annoy the kind of voters who put them in office, it is tempting to recall historian Robert Conquest's Third Law of Politics, which states that 'the behaviour of any bureaucratic organisation can best be understood by assuming that it is controlled by a secret cabal of its enemies'. But I think Labour know exactly what it's doing, and it's doing it on purpose.

AT FIRST glance, the shift in the polls over the year has been seismic. But looked at another way, things have hardly moved at all. In January, I found the Conservatives and Reform combined with 45 per cent of the vote, and the Left (Labour, the Lib Dems, the Greens, the SNP and Plaid Cymru) on 55 per cent. This month, I found the Right on 47 per cent and the Left on 53 per cent. In polling terms, the two results are basically the same.

Labour's main problem, then, is not to prevent its voters drifting over to the Right, but to remain the dominant party of the Left. Labour is desperate to avoid the fate that befell the Tories, who lost swathes of seats to Labour because its vote splintered – the biggest shard going to Reform, not the official opposition. If the Labour vote split between the Greens, Lib Dems, nationalists and 'pro-Gaza independents', party strategists fear this could re-open the door to the forces of conservatism.

Seen in this light, Labour's actions make more sense. The Budget measures to raise taxes on working people to fund even more welfare spending – and especially the decision to lift the two-child benefit cap – was not just a capitulation to Labour backbenchers, though it was certainly that, too.

It was a strategic decision: the latest sign that the party has effectively

Daft questions, yes. But the answers speak volumes about the state of our Government



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given up on the kind of centre-Right voters who may have lent Labour their support last year in order to put the Tories out of their misery.

Other signals that Labour is trying to circle the Left-wing wagons include hints about trying to unpick aspects of Brexit and recognition of a Palestinian state.

In the New Year it will be interesting to see how much of Shabana Mahmood's plan to tighten up immigration rules – which many on the Left see as a deplorable attempt to pander to Reform-minded voters – actually becomes law. Whether any of this will work for Labour is another question. But you can see what it's up to.

A separate battle for supremacy rages on the Right. Nigel Farage (who, for the record, voters see as the most likely to disappear down the pub until Christmas lunch but also the most likely to burn said lunch if he can't get out of the cooking) has been less in the limelight of late, unless you count stories about remarks he may or may not have made at school.

I found people generally reluctant to judge someone on what they said 40 years ago – they certainly wouldn't want to be judged that way themselves – but the storm helps Labour's aim of reminding Left-leaning voters why they should fall in line behind what it argues is the only party capable of stopping Farage becoming PM.

Meanwhile, Kemi Badenoch (most likely to help clear up after Christmas lunch and be good at buying presents

– as well as the most popular choice for a kiss under the mistletoe) is on the up. Having risen to the occasion in her Budget response, her ratings have climbed and she has begun to set out a distinctively Conservative position on the economy, where Reform is shaky. But the Tories have the trickiest task in navigating this Left-Right divide.

Supporters of Left-wing parties overwhelmingly say another party of the Left would be their second choice.

BUT one third of Reform voters would vote for a non-Tory if Reform wasn't standing, and more than half of current Conservatives name a party other than Reform as their second preference, including a sizeable chunk who would pick the Lib Dems and Ed Davey (most likely to insist on playing silly games, but also to take a gift to an elderly neighbour).

That is a sobering thought for those still pushing for some kind of Tory-Reform pact or alliance.

Early in the year, Reform was lifted on a rising tide of anger; by the end, the Conservatives were making headway by diagnosing problems and offering solutions.

As Starmer retreats into his camp, the Right mustn't fall into the trap of retreating into theirs.

Lord Ashcroft is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His research is at LordAshcroftPolls.