

# Badenoch boosted by 'show of strength'

KEMI Badenoch's dramatic sacking of Robert Jenrick for planning to defect to Reform UK has won her the backing of Tory voters.

A poll reveals that 58 per cent of those who backed the Tories in 2024 think Ms Badenoch's shock move showed her strength. They agreed it demonstrated she was a 'strong leader determined to show the Conservatives have changed'.

However, according to analysis by former Conservative deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft, just over one in four (28 per cent) Tory voters disagreed. They thought the episode where Shadow Cabinet member Mr Jenrick was first

By **Brendan Carlin**

sacked and then defected to Reform showed the Conservatives still hadn't 'moved on from infighting and divisions'. And 48 per cent of voters in general agreed.

But Ms Badenoch may be buoyed by the fact more than a quarter of Reform voters (26 per cent) said it showed her in a strong light.

For the first time, as many people said she would make a better prime minister than Keir Starmer as vice versa – 29 per cent each.

However, although Ms Badenoch carries the formal title of Leader

of the Opposition, Nigel Farage's party was seen as mounting the 'most effective opposition' to Labour. One in three of all voters (32 per cent) chose Mr Farage and Reform UK, with even 41 per cent of Tory voters agreeing.

But confidence in running the economy now firmly lies with the Tories, with 31 per cent backing Ms Badenoch and Shadow Chancellor Mel Stride to hold the reins – with 25 per cent for Sir Keir and Chancellor Rachel Reeves.

The poll was concluded amid the crisis over Donald Trump's bid to seize Greenland and his threat to impose tariffs on the UK and other

allies for opposing it. The survey of 5,448 people – consulted by Lord Ashcroft Polls between January 15 and 19 – revealed there was deep unease at the US President's tactics, with 69 per cent saying they didn't like the way he 'went about things' and were worried 'about the consequences'.

Humiliatingly for the Prime Minister, only 7 per cent of voters believed Mr Trump paid some or a great deal of attention to Sir Keir's views. More than half (52 per cent) thought Mr Trump paid no heed to Sir Keir's opinion, with 34 per cent saying he took 'not very much' notice.

**W**HAT does it all mean? As with so much in politics, and indeed in life, what people think of the latest Tory defections to Reform depends on what they thought already.

Those who like Kemi Badenoch salute her swift and decisive move to boot Robert Jenrick out of the party before he jumped.

In my poll last week, nearly seven in ten Tory-leaning voters say it shows a strong leader determined to show that her party has changed. For the first time, as many people say she would make a better prime minister than Keir Starmer as vice versa. She is also at her highest rating yet in a three-way contest with Nigel Farage, though still in third place.

Meanwhile, Reform backers say the new recruits prove their party has the momentum. Others argue the days of Tory turmoil are evidently far from over. The idea that the Conservatives still haven't moved on from infighting and divisions was the prevailing view.

In fact, voters can see an element of truth in all these positions. They see defectors' motives as being mixed, at best (we're talking about politicians, after all). People tend to assume that when an MP switches parties, career ambition and sour grapes play at least as big a part as principle and conviction, and Jenrick was no exception.

**A**T THE same time, Conservative voters in my focus groups applauded Badenoch's tough action ('she's got balls!') but complained she didn't seem to have her party behind her and recognised Reform's coup in winning a high-profile convert.

They also nodded along with Jenrick as he lamented the ways in which Britain was 'broken' and lambasted his former party for its role in the country's ruin.

In other words, Jenrick might be a bounder, but he has a point; Badenoch showed leadership, but it was all grist to the Farage mill.

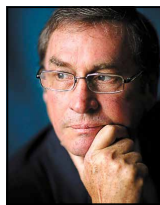
There are risks for Reform, too. One of the party's 2024 voters worried about the insurgent movement being 'watered down'. And another warned: 'Don't take any more Tory has-beens.'

Call it a score draw, then. But how much does it all matter?

One upshot is that it makes any kind of pre-election pact between Reform and the Tories even more unlikely than it was before. The personal rivalries involved are only one reason why the prospect

## Kemi's been tough and Jenrick is a bit of a bounder, say Tory voters

But plenty of them agree with him that Britain is 'broken'



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

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of such a deal is receding. When I asked voters if they would prefer a Conservative-Reform coalition or a combination of Labour, the Lib Dems and Greens, supporters of the Left-wing parties overwhelmingly preferred to be in government with each other, and Reform-leaning voters plumped for an alliance with the Tories.

But Conservative voters were less sure, often saying they didn't know which would be better – or worse. Many Tories are suspicious of Farage. Any such arrangement needs voters to play ball, and they don't like to be taken for granted.

Outside Westminster, the latest episode of party drama hasn't changed anybody's mind because it hasn't changed anybody's life.

Defections belong to the realm of games and plots – the kind of politics that alienates voters, rather than the kind that affects their world. And there is plenty of the latter kind to be getting on with.

Compared to recent international news, another round of political musical chairs seems petty and irrelevant. Some believe

US action in Venezuela was justified, and there is broad support for seizing oil tankers in the Russian shadow fleet and for British troops joining a post-war peacekeeping force in Ukraine. But current global events and their unknowable consequences worry people.

**T**RUMP'S designs on Greenland were once dismissed as the product of his bizarre sense of humour. Despite the emergence of a tentative deal on the territory, tensions within Nato have cut through. The combination of all this makes many uneasy. 'I feel like we're on the edge of World War Three,' one woman told us last week.

Closer to home, I found people genuinely frightened about deep-fakes and the effect of social media on their children. Voters of all stripes felt governments had been reluctant to take on the tech world, but noted that the sinister capabilities of Elon Musk's Grok had roused ministers to battle.

Yet this, too, prompted frustra-

tion – if Labour can spring into action against an app, why can't it show the same sense of urgency over the countless other problems besetting Britain?

Most have given up waiting for any such sense of purpose – whether on migration, crime, growth, welfare or anything else.

When I asked voters to pick from a long list of words to describe Starmer, the top choices were 'out of his depth', 'out of touch', 'weak', 'indecisive' and 'dull'.

Fewer and fewer say they are now giving Labour the benefit of the doubt, and seven in ten expect the party to be out at the next election. The question is, of course, who will replace them?

Whatever the voters made of the spectacle, this month's defections have provided both the impetus and opportunity for Badenoch to set out a Conservative position distinct from that of her rivals on the Right. That doesn't mean reverting to the pre-Brexit Tory party, either in policy or personnel.

Today's challenges are different, but one reason for voters' despair is that nobody seems to know what to do about them. Many are worried or, like Jenrick, angry. But what they really want are answers.

● Lord Ashcroft is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His research can be found at [LordAshcroftPolls.com](http://LordAshcroftPolls.com)

## QUOTES of the week

*'The whole thing is very Oedipus Becks.'*

Comic David Baddiel on Brooklyn Beckham's claim that his mother Victoria danced 'inappropriately' with him at his wedding.

*'I'm 86 for goodness sake!'*

Prue Leith, who is stepping down from The Great British Bake Off after nine years.

*'Dear Jonas: Considering your Country decided not to give me the Nobel Peace Prize for having stopped 8 Wars PLUS, I no longer feel an obligation to think purely of Peace.'*

Donald Trump explains one of his motives for taking over Greenland in a letter to Norwegian PM Jonas Gahr Store.

*'Diplomacy with Donald Trump? He's a T-Rex – you mate with him or he devours you.'*

California governor Gavin Newsom criticises European leaders in Davos for failing to stand up to the US President.

*'TACO.'*

Term coined by the President's critics which resurfaced after he backtracked over his Greenland tariffs threat – it stands for Trump Always Chickens Out.

*'I can't really avoid anxiety but I try to temper it by remembering the things I'm grateful for, going for a walk and shouting at the bushes.'*

Gwyneth Paltrow reveals how she boosts her mental health.

*'All I would say to Elon Musk is he would have to join the back of a very, very, very, very long queue of people who already think I'm a retarded twat, including my four teenage children.'*

Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary, who is involved in an online spat with the X tycoon.

*'You were the first Brexit in the world.'*

Nigel Farage congratulates the United States on its 250th anniversary of independence.

