

Kemi and Nigel neck and neck



By **GLEN OWEN**
POLITICAL EDITOR

As poll reveals the Tories, Reform and Greens are tied, will the Right finally unite to save us from a coalition of chaos?



STATE OF THE PARTIES		
	Reform UK	21%
	Green	21%
	Conservative	21%
	Labour	17%
	Lib Dems	9%

SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT LIFT ITS BAN ON NORTH SEA OIL DRILLING?	
Yes	50%
No	29%

SHOULD THE GOVERNMENT SUBSIDISE ENERGY BILLS?	
Yes	53%
No	31%

SHOULD THE UK BE MORE INVOLVED IN THE IRAN CONFLICT?	
Yes	11%
No	45%

WOULD ANGELA RAYNER MAKE A BETTER PM THAN STARMER?	
Yes	13%
No	31%

DOES DONALD TRUMP HAVE A PLAN FOR THE WAR?	
Yes	23%
No	66%

DOES ZACK POLANSKI'S CLAIM THAT HE COULD ENLARGE BREASTS WITH HYPNOSIS MAKE YOU:	
More favourable to him	1%
Less favourable to him	33%



KEMI BADENOCH has managed to overhaul Nigel Farage's poll lead – leaving the Tories, Reform and the Greens all neck-and-neck in first place for the first time.

The poll, which was conducted by former Conservative deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft, puts the three parties on 21 per cent each, with Labour languishing in fourth place on 17 per cent.

The findings will cheer Ms Badenoch, who has faced mutterings about her future as Tory leader, while rattling nerves within Mr Farage's own ranks over his seeming loss of momentum ahead of next month's local elections.

It is the first time in nearly a year that Reform has not been in the lead.

Last night, polling guru Sir John Curtice, professor of politics at the University of Strathclyde, said the three-way tie

'What kind of person would I be if I just gave up?'

indicated that the UK was in 'uncharted territory' in terms of the complexity of voting patterns and the likelihood of no single party being able to command a majority at the next general election.

It is also likely to increase calls for the Tories and Reform to 'unite the Right' by forming a pre-election alliance.

If Sir Keir Starmer's Labour, Zack Polanski's Greens and Sir Ed Davey's Liberal Democrats joined forces in a 'coalition of chaos', while the Right remained split, the Leftist alliance would theoretically be able to command 47 per cent of the vote and form a government.

Despite Labour's lowly ranking, one party source had a bullish take on the poll this weekend, telling this newspaper: 'We are just four points off the lead.'

Lord Ashcroft's way of measuring party support is different from that of most pollsters. Instead of asking voters what they would do in a hypothetical election tomorrow, he asks them how likely they would be to back each party at the next election – whenever it comes.

His method correctly pointed to the Leave vote in the 2016 Brexit



referendum at a time when many other pollsters were anticipating a victory for Remain. The drop in support for Reform has also been echoed by other polls. The party has gone from highs of 35 per cent in September to an average of 26 per cent now. Senior

Tory figures mock former Tories, such as Robert Jenrick and Nadhim Zahawi, who have defected to Reform, as having left too soon for a 'one-man band'.

Last week, Mr Farage sacked his new housing spokesman, Simon Dudley, who defected from the Tories in February, after Mr Dudley said that the 2017 Grenfell fire, which killed 72 people, was a 'tragedy' but 'everyone dies in the end'.

Mr Farage's support base on the Right is also being threatened by his arch-critic, ex-Reform MP Rupert Lowe, who has established

a party called Restore Britain. Mr Lowe says that Restore is already Britain's fourth-largest party, with 123,000 members, surpassing the Tories on 113,000.

For her part, Ms Badenoch said on Friday that she would remain as Conservative leader whatever the results of the local elections next month.

She said: 'It is absurd [to suggest I would be replaced]. I am going to fight on. I don't know of any party leader who has decided that, following a local election result, they would throw in the towel. 'What

kind of person would I be if I just gave up? It's hardly what voters want, either.'

'We had many leadership contests before I came in, and fat lot of good it did us.'

Other questions in Lord Ashcroft's poll reveal the public's disquiet about America's war on Iran.

Just 11 per cent of voters think the UK should be taking a more active role in the conflict, with 45 per cent saying we should not. Two-thirds do not think Donald Trump has 'a plan' for the war; 23 per cent do.

There is also some consolation for Sir Keir in that only 13 per cent of voters think his former deputy, Angela Rayner, would make a better PM than him.

As my survey shows, their policies are a heady mix of the superficially appealing and wildly unpopular. I found big majorities in favour of a wealth tax, higher taxes on energy companies and a £15-an-hour minimum wage (though I suspect people would be less keen on the effects of these ideas if they were put in practice).

Only one per cent say that the boast makes them feel 'more favourable' towards him, compared with 33 per cent who say it makes them feel less favourable.

MY LATEST poll has thrown up something very unusual – an unprecedented three-way tie between Reform, the Conservatives and the Greens.

It's true that with no election in sight, voting intention polls should be taken with more than a pinch of salt.

It's also worth noting that I assess party support in a different way from most pollsters.

I ask how likely people think they are to end up voting for each party on a scale from zero to 100, and include those who put their chances of voting for one party above 50 – an alternative to forcing them into a decision on what they would do if there were an election tomorrow (which there won't be).

But others have also found things getting closer in recent weeks. Whatever the headline numbers, I think we can detect some of the reasons it might be happening.

By his melancholy standards, Keir Starmer hasn't had a bad couple of weeks. Whether through conviction, habitual indecision or the fact that he only does what Attorney General Lord Hermer allows him to, many voters think the Prime Minister has ended up in more or less the right position over the conflict in Iran.

UNFORTUNATELY for him, that has not boosted Labour's support. Some are less critical of Starmer than usual but his government's overall record means people are hardly raring to get out and vote for him.

At the same time, as this snapshot captures, the Greens are enjoying something of a moment.

However numbers are calculated, there is no denying the remarkable progress they have made under Zack Polanski, the eco-populist and noted boob whisperer.

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One thing voters won't tolerate: politicians who deliberately make things WORSE



By **LORD ASHCROFT**
POLLSTER AND AUTHOR

deterrent and decriminalising all drugs for personal use.

Perhaps more controversially, nearly a third of voters said they felt less favourable towards Polanski when they heard that in his days as a hypnotist he once claimed he could increase the size of women's breasts by hypnosis.

Polanski claims to have apologised and put all this behind him, but in a different way he is arguably still at it.

Just as there are those who want to change their body shape through mind over matter, there will always be people eager to believe we can fund the NHS by taxing the rich, that legalising drugs will make our streets safer and that open borders will mean tolerance and harmony: the same wishful thinking, but for a slightly different audience.

Like other pollsters I have found Reform UK's overall lead narrowing since the start of the year. That's not to say their bubble has burst, simply that their seemingly inexorable rise has abated, at least for now.

Global events might be part of the reason, especially over the last month, and not just because of Nigel Farage's friendship with President Trump.

The perceived success of Trump's second term was always likely to be a factor in the

fortunes of other populists on the Right. After the President took office in a blizzard of executive orders, British voters regularly told us it would be nice to see leaders over here equally prepared to move fast and break things.

We haven't heard much of that for a while, funnily enough. Perhaps the idea is less appealing when breaking things becomes literal rather than metaphorical.

SOMEWHAT like the PM, Kemi Badenoch has consolidated her personal ratings but without seeing this translate into a major advance for her party.

She has piqued people's interest and has the measure of Starmer in the Commons but these are only the first steps in achieving a wider Tory revival.

'I do think she talks a lot more sense,' one former Tory told us. 'But when they were in, they didn't change things.'

Most still think the party is much the same as it was when they booted it out so decisively; altering that perception is a critical part of the next phase of her leadership.

Starmer, meanwhile, is left to deal with the day-to-day problems of governing. Most say

they want the state to step in and help if energy prices rise significantly (Tory supporters, notably, are the only group to disagree, saying we can't afford endless bailouts).

People are divided as to whether help should be universal, or – as seems to be Labour's inclination – should favour those already claiming benefits.

In a generous mood, voters might concede that there's little politicians can do about spiralling prices resulting from a war on the other side of the world, but they do ask that ministers don't go out of their way to make things worse.

Having seen how precarious our supplies from the Middle East can be, more think the government should end its absurd ban on new oil and gas exploration in the North Sea than keep it.

For worried families, household bills and security of supply tend to win out over net zero targets.

For now, Polanski and the Greens are unencumbered by such realities. Their appeal is about vibes, not policies.

'I like how hopeful all of their ideals sound,' one young man said to us last week.

'With the state of the world as it is, I just feel like it's a good idea to go for someone whose purpose is to just try and make everything better.'

If only someone had thought of doing that before.

● Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. For more on his work, visit lordashcroft.com. Follow him on X/Facebook @LordAshcroft.

Green Rachel in a jam over 55mph limit

By **Elizabeth Ivens**

GREENS' Deputy Leader Rachel Millward suffered a car crash interview yesterday, admitting she knows nothing of party plans to limit motorway speed to 55mph.

Ms Millward was left speechless and then stuttering when quizzed on BBC Radio 4's Today programme about the plans, part of leader Zack Polanski's 'war on motorists'.

Under the policy, exclusively revealed in yesterday's Daily Mail, the motorway speed limit would be slashed by 15mph – and 20mph limits would be enforced in all built-

up areas. Red-faced Ms Millward seemed blindsided when pressed by presenter Anna Foster over whether the strategy was 'correct'.

After a pause, she replied: 'I am not aware of that policy. It may or may not be one of our policies chosen by members which goes through a conference process.'

Ms Millward tried to change the subject but incredulous Ms Foster said: 'That *might* be part of your

policy? You are the Deputy Leader – if you were lower down I might not expect you to know but you are the Deputy Leader and don't even know if that is something that is being discussed as a policy?'

Ms Millward hit back: 'It is not one of our leading policies at this point. It is not something we are campaigning on in the election.'

Under the Greens' policy, driving would also be deterred by raising car taxes 'incrementally' and cutting parking spaces to force vehicles off the road. Motorists

could be forced to retake 'stricter and more comprehensive' driving tests every five years.

The Greens say 'driving is not a right but a privilege' and Mr Polanski has boasted he wants to 'make driving slower, more expensive and, in many cases, impossible'.

Ms Millward, also a councillor in East Sussex, previously hit headlines by promoting the Greens' 'refugees welcome here' slogan while opposing a decision to house 600 male asylum seekers at an Army base in Crowborough, East Sussex.



STUMPED: Rachel Millward

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The Mail



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ROBERT HARDMAN'S RIVETING NEW BIOGRAPHY



DRILL, ED, DRILL

As fuel prices soar, voters tell Miliband to ditch his Net Zero obsession and untap the North Sea oil and gas that would make ALL our lives easier

EXCLUSIVE

By **Glen Owen**

POLITICAL EDITOR

LABOUR should lift its ban on drilling in the North Sea immediately to stop households from being hammered by the cost of the Iran crisis, voters have said.

The findings – that Energy Secretary Ed Miliband should ditch Net Zero dogma and release the £165 billion worth of oil and gas beneath British waters – come amid a growing Cabinet split on the issue and mounting pressure on Chancellor Rachel Reeves to scrap planned petrol tax hikes in the autumn.

Since Iran began its blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, following US and Israeli attacks, global energy prices have soared, with the cost of a litre of diesel in the UK heading towards the £2 mark.

Research conducted by former Conservative deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft has found that half of all voters think Mr Miliband should 'drill, baby, drill' – in the words of Donald Trump, who was elected

SHOWBIZ EXCLUSIVE

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in the US on a promise to ramp up gas and oil production.

The poll, shared with The Mail on Sunday, also shows an unprecedented three-way split between the Tories, Reform and the Greens, who are all on 21 per cent, with Labour trailing in fourth place on 17 per cent.

It is the first time in nearly a year that Reform UK has not led in a survey and will add to mounting anxiety within the party over Nigel Farage's apparent loss of momentum ahead of next month's local elections.

With no end in sight to the Iran war:

● The desperate hunt for an American airman downed in Iran intensified last night as US special forces raced against armed nomads to find the missing crewman in the south of the country;

● President Trump issued a blistering warning to Iran to re-open the Strait of Hormuz, warning on social media: 'Time is running out – 48 hours before all hell will

'Bills win out over Net Zero targets'

reign [sic] down on them. Glory be to God!'

● An elite team of Royal Navy divers are on standby to deploy to the Strait of Hormuz to help defuse Iranian sea mines blocking shipping lanes;

● Former RAF pilot John Peters – who was shot down and captured in Iraq in 1991 – warned the downed airman would be involved in a desperate bid to evade capture.

A fifth of the world's oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz and its closure has put intense pressure on the global economy.

Britain's North Sea oil reserves were central to Mar-

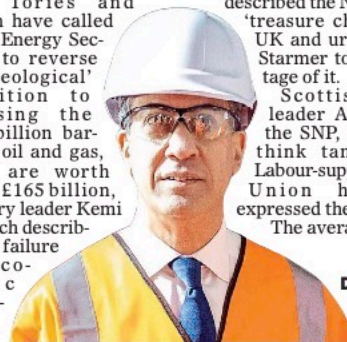
garet Thatcher's administration in the 1980s, with the £70billion in revenues helping to fund industrial restructuring and tax cuts.

Mr Miliband has stuck to his Net Zero-driven opposition to new fossil fuel extraction, insisting that approving new drilling licences would not lower bills for UK consumers.

Last week, he said that 'people who say new exploration licences will somehow create huge amounts of energy for us' were 'just wrong'.

Ms Reeves, by contrast, has said she is 'very happy' to back exploration at the Rosebank oilfield and Jackdaw gas field in the North Sea.

The Tories and Reform have called for the Energy Secretary to reverse his 'ideological' opposition to accessing the three billion barrels of oil and gas, which are worth about £165 billion, with Tory leader Kemi Badenoch describing the failure as 'economic insanity'.



DOGMA: Ed Miliband

Last night, Reform's deputy leader Richard Tice told this newspaper: 'This poll proves that the British people have far more common sense than the political class. We've got hundreds of billions of pounds worth of energy treasure sitting under our feet.'

It's our patriotic duty to maximise British gas production, create jobs, boost growth, and achieve true energy independence.

'Labour and the Tories have failed on this for years. Reform will lift the restrictions on day one, get drilling and deliver lower bills for everyone.'

That view has been echoed by President Trump, who has described the North Sea as a 'treasure chest' for the UK and urged Sir Keir Starmer to take advantage of it.

Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar, the SNP, Tony Blair's think tank and the Labour-supporting GMB Union have also expressed their support.

The average price of a

litre of diesel at UK forecourts is up 30 per cent since the start of the war to 185.2p and could breach £2 within weeks, experts have warned.

Meanwhile, petrol prices have risen 16 per cent to an average of 154.5p per litre over the same period.

Ms Reeves, who is raking in more than £100million in extra VAT receipts each month, is planning to end the current 5p a litre fuel duty relief in September, a move which will add, on average, another £3 to the cost of filling a tank.

Governments around the world have been lowering fuel taxes to ease the burden on households from soaring petrol and diesel prices.

Anthony Albanese, the Australian Prime Minister, has already halved fuel duty.

Writing in today's Mail on Sunday, Lord Ashcroft says: 'Having seen how precarious our supplies from the Middle East can be, more think the Government should end its absurd ban on new oil and gas exploration in the North Sea than keep it.'

'For worried families, household bills and security of supply tend to win out over Net Zero targets.'

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