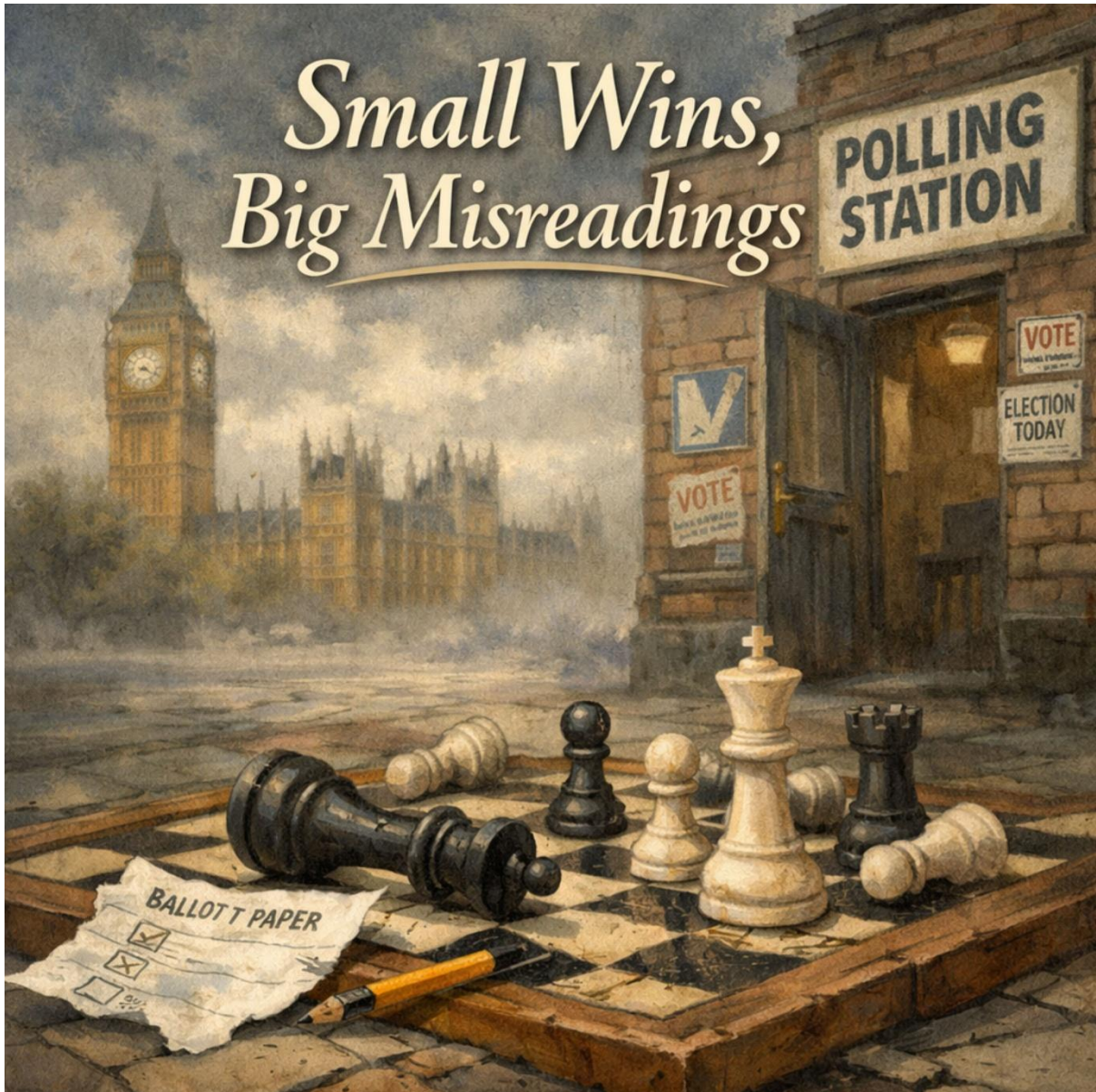


Small Wins, Big Misreadings: Why the Right's 'Momentum' isn't What it Seems

Adam Tugwell | 20 June 2026



The debate after the Makerfield by-election has been framed as a problem of division:

Too many parties on the right, too many similar candidates, too many votes scattered across too many competing brands.

That is the easy explanation. It is also the wrong one.

The right is not losing because it is divided. It is divided because it is lost.

The familiar argument has already begun again. One party should “step aside” so another can win. A Reform MP has suggested that Restore should withdraw, or would otherwise carry responsibility if Reform failed to take power at the next general election. The Conservatives make the same claim when they insist Reform is splitting “their” vote.

Technically, yes: the vote *was* split.

But that fact does not prove what its loudest interpreters think it proves.

The numbers in Makerfield point to something more serious:

Even on the generous assumption that the Conservatives, Reform and Restore could have combined their votes, they still would not have beaten Burnham.

That matters because Makerfield was not a neutral test.

Yes, it had its own peculiar dynamics. The “get Burnham, get rid of Starmer” bounce created a surge of anti-Labour government energy that will not automatically repeat elsewhere.

This was a highly specific contest shaped by a high-profile figure, local sentiment and a desire to send a message.

Yet even with those favourable conditions, the result was not good for the right, and it should be setting off alarms in all three party headquarters.

If a by-election with a uniquely energised anti-government mood still could not produce a right-wing contender capable of overtaking Labour, then the problem is not simply the split.

The problem is that none of the parties is yet strong enough, connected enough or trusted enough to win in a way that really matters, even when the wind is supposedly at its back.

Aberdeen South Doesn't Change the Picture - Even Though the Conservatives Won

If Makerfield exposed the right's weakness in England, Aberdeen South exposed something just as important in Scotland, but from the opposite direction.

The Conservatives won Aberdeen South, and they are already presenting it as evidence of a comeback.

But that interpretation collapses the moment the context is taken seriously.

Aberdeen South was shaped by one defining issue:

The future of North Sea drilling - a question that cuts across party lines, regional identity and economic survival.

This was a contest in which the Conservatives could position themselves as defenders of local industry against a Labour Party perceived, rightly or wrongly, as hostile to it.

In other words, Aberdeen South was tailor-made for a Conservative win.

That does not make the result meaningless, but it does limit what can honestly be claimed from it.

It shows that the Conservatives can still win where the central issue aligns almost perfectly with their message, their history and their local brand.

That is not a national revival. It is a minimum expectation in conditions that were almost perfectly aligned.

Aberdeen South does not contradict the warning of Makerfield. It reinforces it. If the Conservatives can win only where the stars align perfectly, and Reform and Restore cannot win even when anti-government conditions are favourable, then the problem is not the seats.

The problem is the right itself.

The Entitlement Problem: Three Parties, One Assumption

The demand that another party should step aside is not a strategy.

It is entitlement dressed up as electoral realism.

Each party behaves as though it is the rightful heir to the right's future:

- The Conservatives believe they deserve priority because they have the machine, the history and the infrastructure.
- Reform believes it deserves priority because it has momentum and a charismatic leader.
- Restore believes it deserves priority because it claims to represent “real conservatism.”

But none of them has earned the authority to make that claim.

This is the same problem I explored in [What Is the Right Really For? \(June 2026\)](#):

All three parties are fighting over a conservatism none of them can reach because none of them has yet shown that it understands what conservatism actually requires.

Conservatism, properly understood, is not merely reaction, nostalgia or grievance. It is a discipline of stewardship: responsibility to place, continuity, community, inherited duty and the moral obligation to preserve what is valuable while repairing what is broken.

If any one of these parties were truly resonating with the public, genuinely connecting with people and the issues shaping their lives, it would matter far less how many similar parties stood against it.

It would still find a way to win.

The fact that none of them can do that right now is the real story of both Makerfield and Aberdeen South.

Reform's Paradox: Performance at the Top, Weakness Everywhere Else

Reform has one of the most media-savvy political communicators in the country.

Nigel Farage is, by any measure, a highly effective performer in today's media-driven politics. But a charismatic leader, and a handful of MPs able to survive the media scramble, is not a formula for government.

The issue is not the candidates themselves. It is the party around them.

Reform's weakness is structural:

- its candidate-selection process is thin,
- its training and support systems are underdeveloped,
- its organisational culture is still built for insurgency, not governance.

If Reform wants to be a party of power, it has to act like one.

It needs to dress for the job it wants, not the one it already has.

And credibility is not a performance, but a discipline.

In today's politics, authenticity is often performed for the camera, but Reform is not yet performing seriousness at street level - in its candidate depth, organisation and policy discipline.

Voters can sense when a party is not yet serious about the responsibilities it claims to seek.

Reform's paradox is simple:

It has a leader who can command a room, but not yet a party that can command the country.

The Conservatives' Advantage - and Their Curse

Only the Conservatives currently have the basic machinery of a party capable of fighting at scale:

- a functioning candidate-selection machine,
- media-ready candidates,
- and the ability to field hundreds of people who can survive the daily media grind.

That does not mean they should lead.

It does not mean they deserve to lead.

And it certainly does not mean they are the right vehicle for renewal.

But it does mean Reform and Restore are still a long way from having the organisational robustness required to compete across the country.

The Conservatives' curse is different:

They have machinery, but no meaning.

This is the argument I made at the heart of [*Britain is Waiting for Leadership \(May 2026\)*](#):

The public is waiting for someone to lead, but the political class is looking the wrong way.

Restore's Challenge: Values Without Viability

Restore claims to represent "real conservatism", but it has not yet offered a coherent, interconnected policy framework that speaks to the real issues of the day.

Nor do the Conservatives.

Nor does Reform.

That is the deeper truth:

None of the parties on the right are fundamentally conservative in the sense people need.

They have slogans.

They have instincts.

They have grievances.

But they do not yet have a governing framework grounded in stewardship, locality, responsibility, continuity and community.

Politics without moral purpose becomes performance, not service.

The System Has Changed - And the Right Hasn't

The assumption that “the right will form the next government anyway” is also a form of entitlement.

A real mandate comes only from:

- winning a majority,
- making clear, deliverable commitments that are thought through and result in the outcomes people need,
- which are then honoured with integrity.

That is difficult today because politics has been absorbed into a wider system:

A system that constrains, redirects and often neutralises the very governments elected to change it - through institutional inertia, legal frameworks, global economic pressures and the permanent machinery of administration.

This is the dynamic explored in [*The Contemporary Politician's Dilemma \(Dec 2024\)*](#):

Governments inherit a system they do not control, and then get blamed for failing to change it.

Any party that does not recognise this, and does not level with the public about where we are, why we are here and how we got here, will find itself in exactly the same position Labour now occupies, and the Conservatives occupied before them.

The right cannot win by pretending the old world still exists.

The Part None of Them Wants to Hear

This is the part none of them wants to hear:

The uncomfortable truth is that none of these parties has yet shown it understands the tradition it claims to represent.

They keep insisting they are conservatives, yet too little in their behaviour suggests they understand what conservatism is, how it was lost, or why the right has collectively ended up in this mess.

This is the argument laid out plainly in [*What Is the Right Really For? \(June 2026\)*](#):

They have forgotten the meaning of the very tradition they all claim to defend.

The UK is at a crisis point. The public is weighing the credibility of every option on the right, hoping that this time the label on the tin will match the contents inside.

People are tired of buying promises that evaporate the moment the votes are counted.

The problem is not how the deckchairs are arranged. The problem is that the ship itself is taking on water, and the public knows it. They do not want another reshuffle of the same broken parts. They want to be rescued from the very real risk of the whole UK ship going down.

That requires something more serious than a new slogan or a rearranged alliance.

Not a novelty vessel. Not a rebranded dinghy. Not a patched-up version of the one already taking on water.

It requires a traditional ship: one that recognises its own value, its heritage and its purpose, rather than accepting the value assigned to it by the same forces that have spent decades weakening what it once protected.

Until the right understands that, it is not ready to lead.

The Real Lesson of Makerfield - and Aberdeen South

The lesson of Makerfield and Aberdeen South is not that the right needs fewer parties.

It is that the right needs a purpose strong enough to shape those parties into something capable of governing.

Together, these contests show that:

- The right has energy, but no coherence.
- It has anger, but no shared purpose.
- It has instincts, but no strategy.
- It has parties, but no movement.
- It has performers, but not enough authenticity.
- It has leaders, but not enough of the right candidates.
- It has values, but no viable policies.
- It has ambition, but no understanding of the system it seeks to govern.

Until the right understands the system it is operating in, stops demanding that others step aside, and starts building real connection, depth and honesty, it will keep losing elections it believes it should win.

The right does not need fewer parties.

It needs a purpose that can survive reality.

Until then, “step aside” politics is not strategy. It is avoidance - a distraction from the deeper work none of the parties has yet begun.

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