

The Next Election Cannot Really Be “Won” - And Why What Follows Matters Even More

Adam Tugwell | 23 August 2026



We are all thinking about what happens next. Quietly or otherwise, people find predictions irresistible. We know they are usually wrong. We know the future rarely behaves itself. But predictions give us something we understandably crave: reassurance. They offer the sense that someone, somewhere, has a map, even if the map is little more than a sketch drawn in the sand.

I write about the future often, but not in the way pundits do. I do not make fixed predictions about elections, because doing so is usually a fool's errand. The political runes only ever speak clearly in the moment you read them, and even then they whisper rather than shout. What I try to do instead is look beneath the events themselves and ask what the deeper forces shaping them make possible, likely, or unavoidable.

Right now, those deeper forces are telling us something uncomfortable: **the next general election cannot really be “won”**, at least not in the way people imagine. And the election that follows may matter even more, if world events don't intervene first.

To understand why, we need to step back from the daily noise and look at the operating system beneath British politics: a system that has become fragile, hollowed out, and increasingly unable to produce meaningful change.

The System Behind the System

One of the clearest windows into this reality came in *The Contemporary Politician's Dilemma* (2024), where I described a moment when newly elected or returning MPs who have found themselves with power discover how government actually works.

They arrive in Westminster full of promises, only to be told - often within days - that everything the previous government was doing, no matter what it said publicly, was the only way to keep the machinery of state running. The alternative was to risk first the economy, then government itself, and then the public services people rely on.

This is the moment the illusion cracks. Politicians realise that every social issue - housing, immigration, inflation, the cost of living, benefits, productivity - is tied to the economic model. The economic model depends on growth. Growth depends on spending. Spending depends on narrative. Narrative depends on performance. And performance depends on maintaining decline in a way that looks like progress.

The practical consequences are visible everywhere. Housing cannot be fixed without confronting land, debt, planning, wages, infrastructure and the financial model that sits beneath them. Welfare cannot be discussed honestly without asking why so many people in work still cannot live independently on what work pays. Public services cannot be restored simply by changing the minister or the slogan above the department. Each problem is treated as separate, yet each is tied to the same economic and institutional framework.

Governments still hold office, pass laws and make announcements. But their room for meaningful manoeuvre has narrowed dramatically. They increasingly manage decline rather than reverse it. That is why so many governments end up looking alike. That is why promises evaporate. That is why legitimacy drains away.

The Establishment Is Not What People Think It Is

In July 2026, I wrote *The Establishment Is Not What You Think It Is*, which explains the deeper mechanism behind this paralysis.

People imagine the Establishment as a group - elites, mandarins, financiers, media, “the blob”. But the real Establishment is not a class. It is a worldview. A mental operating system. A set of assumptions about what is “realistic”, “responsible”, “credible” and “possible”.

This worldview saturates everything: politics, media, finance, public services, professional norms, institutional culture. It shapes how people think without them realising it, because it feels like reality. It rewards conformity, punishes deviation, and treats alternatives as naive or dangerous. It is enforced not by conspiracy, but by incentives.

This is why even anti-establishment actors end up reinforcing the system. Reform, Restore, and even parts of the Conservatives behave as if they are fighting the Establishment, yet their actions reveal that they operate fully within its worldview. They judge success by market confidence, treat narrative as power, and assume that centralised management, competitive funding and measurable outputs are the only acceptable forms of action.

The Establishment is not something you overthrow. It is something you wake up inside.

The Right's Fragmentation Is a Symptom, Not a Cause

In *What is the Right Really For?* (June 2026), I argued that the right is not divided because its factions have different philosophies. It is divided because they are all trying to reclaim a conservatism that the modern political system no longer allows to exist.

Traditional conservatism depends on locality, community, stewardship, continuity, identity and self-governance. But the Establishment worldview depends on centralisation, corporatism, globalisation, managerialism, technocracy and distant authority. These two worldviews cannot coexist. The right is not fighting over ideology. It is fighting over something unreachable.

This is why the Conservatives defend a system that is no longer conservative. Reform tries to break the system without knowing what to replace it with. Restore tries to revive conservatism in a landscape where conservatism cannot function. Their conflict is not ideological. It is existential.

The Behaviour of Parties Reveals the Fragility of the System

The strain was already visible up to a year ago. Labour reshuffled repeatedly to manage perception. Reform behaved like a brand rather than a governing force, staging

conferences that looked more like victory rallies than policy events. The Conservatives clung to relevance through messaging rather than substance. Farage mistook momentum for capability. Quasi-Tories migrated to Reform expecting instant change.

This is the behaviour of a system running out of room. Parties behave as if optics equal authority, narrative equals power, and performance equals legitimacy. They chase headlines because they struggle to deliver outcomes. They polish the surface because they cannot repair the structure. They fight over the steering wheel of a vehicle that no longer responds properly to steering.

The Global Dominoes

The next election could be overtaken by events long before polling day. The list is not short: the Strait of Hormuz, financial instability (including Japan), a potential AI-driven bubble burst, geopolitical escalation, supply chain fragility, food security, energy shocks. Any one of these could expose how vulnerable the UK has become.

A world-derived crisis could very easily reveal just how fragile the UK really is - not only economically, but institutionally and politically. It could expose weak spots like food security, supply chains, and over-reliance on imports. And it could make the result of the next general election a moot point, because we simply do not have politicians or leaders capable of operating in an environment that requires real leadership rather than performance.

Yes, this may be pessimistic. Britain has endured crises before: economic shocks, constitutional upheavals, wars, strikes, deindustrialisation, party collapses and social fracture. Institutions can bend without breaking, and electorates can tolerate more discomfort than commentators often assume.

But the question is not whether Britain has survived crises before. It is whether the present system still contains the intellectual, economic and institutional capacity to renew itself from within.

That is far less clear.

The Legitimacy Crisis

Burnham's legitimacy problem is therefore not merely personal. It is systemic. He may have arrived in No.10 through legitimate processes, but legitimacy is not produced by process alone. It is produced by capability, consent and a credible sense of direction. Those things are difficult to generate when the same worldview sets the limits of what any leader is permitted to imagine.

This is why Reform can look triumphant, the Conservatives nostalgic, Labour managerial, and Restore principled but powerless. Each speaks to a real

dissatisfaction. Yet none has convincingly shown how it would escape the assumptions that created the dissatisfaction in the first place.

The Next Election Cannot Really Be “Won”

Polling today suggests that no party can comfortably expect a working majority. The right is fragmented. The left may form a coalition. Reform may surge. Conservatives may revive slightly. Restore may remain fringe. But these are surface-level dynamics.

The deeper truth is that even a working majority cannot govern in any meaningful sense if the system itself is at its limit. The next government, whatever its shape, will face the same dilemma as the newly elected MP who discovers that the machinery of state permits far less change than the campaign suggested. It may manage decline, or it may disturb the settlement enough to expose how fragile that settlement has become.

The Lifetime of the Next Government

The next government will inherit a fragile economic model, a saturated worldview, degraded public services, brittle institutions, exhausted narratives, declining legitimacy and global volatility. Its tools will be limited. Its room for manoeuvre will be narrow. Its philosophical foundations will be uncertain. Its institutional capacity will be stretched. Its public trust will be weak.

This is why governments now appear to fail faster. Expectations remain high, but capacity is lower. Promises are larger, but delivery is weaker. Narratives are louder, but reality intervenes sooner.

It is possible that the next administration may have months, not years, before it too is forced to admit that it cannot find a way out of the mess using the tools it inherited.

What Happens When the System Can No Longer Continue

Sooner or later, someone near power will have to say what the system currently cannot say: we cannot continue like this anymore.

That moment need not be revolutionary in the dramatic sense. It may simply be the moment when the worldview breaks, the operating system fails, the Establishment loses coherence, and the political map begins to dissolve enough for new possibilities to emerge.

The Establishment is not something you defeat. It is something you outgrow.

What Renewal Requires

If renewal is possible, it will require a return to locality, community-rooted economies, stewardship, identity grounded in place, governance by the governed, and institutions

that serve people rather than systems. This is not nostalgia. It is the foundation of a functioning society.

Conclusion: The Election Is Not the Story - The System Is

The next election matters. But it cannot be “won” in any meaningful sense. The real story is the system itself: its worldview, its fragility, its limits, its contradictions, its saturation, and its inability to solve the problems it created.

The question is not simply who wins. The question is what happens when the system can no longer hide its own failures. And the deeper question is whether enough people can see clearly enough to imagine something better: not merely a different leader, party or slogan, but a different set of assumptions about how economies, institutions and communities should function.

That is the real choice ahead. Not whether the Establishment can be defeated, but whether it can finally be outgrown.

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