# ‘PARTY LIKE IT’S 1974’

## BACK TO THE FUTURE

**By Ben Philips**

It is February 1974 and Britain is in the grip of a three-day working week, one of several measures introduced by Edward Heath’s Conservative government in an attempt to safeguard electricity supplies following an overtime ban by the National Union of Mineworkers.

The overtime ban was itself a response to the government’s decision to cap wages to control inflation as a result of the oil price shock the previous October after OPEC decided to implement a total embargo against those countries who had supported Israel in the recent Arab-Israeli conflict.

### ‘Who Governs Britain?’

So exasperated had Heath become in his dealings with the unions that he went to the country in the hope of securing a mandate from the voters to underpin his counter-inflationary policy.

Campaigning under the slogan ‘Who governs Britain?’ the answer he got back was blunt and to the point. ‘Not you, mate.’

The general election that followed resulted in a hung parliament with Harold Wilson’s Labour Party seventeen seats short of an overall majority. Wilson called another election the following October and won with a bare majority of just three seats.

It is worth recalling these events because the election of

1974 marked the beginning of the end of the post-war political consensus. Until that point central planning had been the stated goal of both main parties since 1945. It had secured victory in wartime so the reasoning went, why not in peace?

And so, the great postwar experiment began. The means of production, distribution and exchange were nationalised as the state massively extended its powers over all aspects of social and economic activity. From coal and car production to health and welfare, there was hardly an area of people's lives that the man in Whitehall did not have a handle on. indeed, such was the level of government intervention that the British economy more closely resembled that of a Warsaw Pact country than that of a free-trading liberal democracy.

By the end of the 1950's however, that consensus began to unravel – slowly at first and then more rapidly as the years wore on. Harold Wilson's election victories in 1964 and 1966 marked a change in the social fabric of the governing class, but the nation's underlying trajectory continued to spiral downwards.

By the 1970's Britain was in the grip of a full-blown economic crisis of stagnant growth, rising taxes, rocketing inflation and widespread industrial unrest.

Harold Wilson resigned as Prime Minister in March 1976, his successor James Callaghan took over and Labour's tiny majority finally evaporated in 1977. All the while the government continued to stagger under the weight of micro-managing the economy and imposing a 5% pay limit as its principal counter-inflationary strategy.

When in the autumn of 1978 Ford workers secured a 17% pay rise from their management following a very good year's trading, the signal was picked up by workers all over the country who duly tore up the government's 5% pay cap and demanded similar increases on pain of strike action.

The resulting Winter of Discontent finally reduced post-war central planning to ashes and a new phoenix arose in its place

## FIFTY YEARS ON

Fast forward fifty years and a similar sense of impending gloom now grips Britain in 2024. And the parallels with events fifty years ago are striking. For Heath and Wilson, read Sunak and Starmer. Two uninspiring leaders presiding over two uninspiring parties and a failed political consensus that the country no longer believes in.

Just as Britian was riven by industrial strife in the 1970’s, so today those sharp divisions can be seen elsewhere, across the media, in our social and cultural life, and in many of our institutions which seem more interested in pursuing their own agenda than in serving the public at large.

And in Parliament too an extraordinary disconnect appears to have developed between those we send to Westminster and the voters they are supposed to represent.

Just as the political class were slow to pick up the public’s exasperation at the levels of industrial militancy during the 1960’s and ‘70’s, so too the present generation of politicians seem quite unable or unwilling to discuss the issues affecting the general public, with uncontrolled immigration the most pressing of all.

There are of course important differences between now and 1974. As those two general elections that year indicated, support for both parties held up, so much so that there was scarcely a seat to separate them in either contest.

Today the political landscape looks very different. Such is the anger and sense of betrayal among Conservative voters that their patience has finally snapped and with it, possibly, the

survival of the Party they once supported.

By contrast Labour looks set to win an unprecedented majority of around 190 – based on the latest polling – the largest projected majority in modern political history.

And yet, and yet, despite the headline figures, neither party generates anything like the enthusiasm among voters that we have seen in the past. Indeed, it is said that the 'none of the above' is likely to be the overall winner in terms of the bare numbers.

It is worth drawing one further historical parallel from these two periods in our recent history. Both involve renewal. And both revolve around particular individuals.

Following the Conservative Party's defeat in October of '74, it was clear that Ted Heath's time had come to an end. Since becoming leader of the party in 1965 he had fought four general election campaigns and lost three of them. It was time for a change.

With Keith Joseph no longer a viable candidate on the Right, it fell to an outsider, one Margaret Thatcher to put her hat in the ring and contest the leadership on a new and radical platform. In February 1975 she was duly elected leader of the Party and spent the next five years thinking and planning ahead and putting plans in place in readiness for an election in 1978 or 1979.

Fifty years on, a very different type of character is also making waves on the conservative side of politics. He too has said he is working to a five year plan to be implemented in 2028 or 2029.

At the time of writing, Nigel Farage has thrown his hat in the ring albeit on a Reform Party ticket and not as a Conservative Party candidate.

While there are obvious differences between the two, they have both tapped into the sense of frustration and anger at the paralysis which appears to have gripped the country. Both have challenged the status quo and both have offered a radical agenda for change.

Is history about to repeat itself fifty years on? Is this the time when the country embarks on a long march towards transformational and radical reform as it did in 1979?

Things seem suddenly to have sparked into life.

Only time will tell.

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