

Weekly edition

World in brief

Opinion

United States

Finance & economics

Business

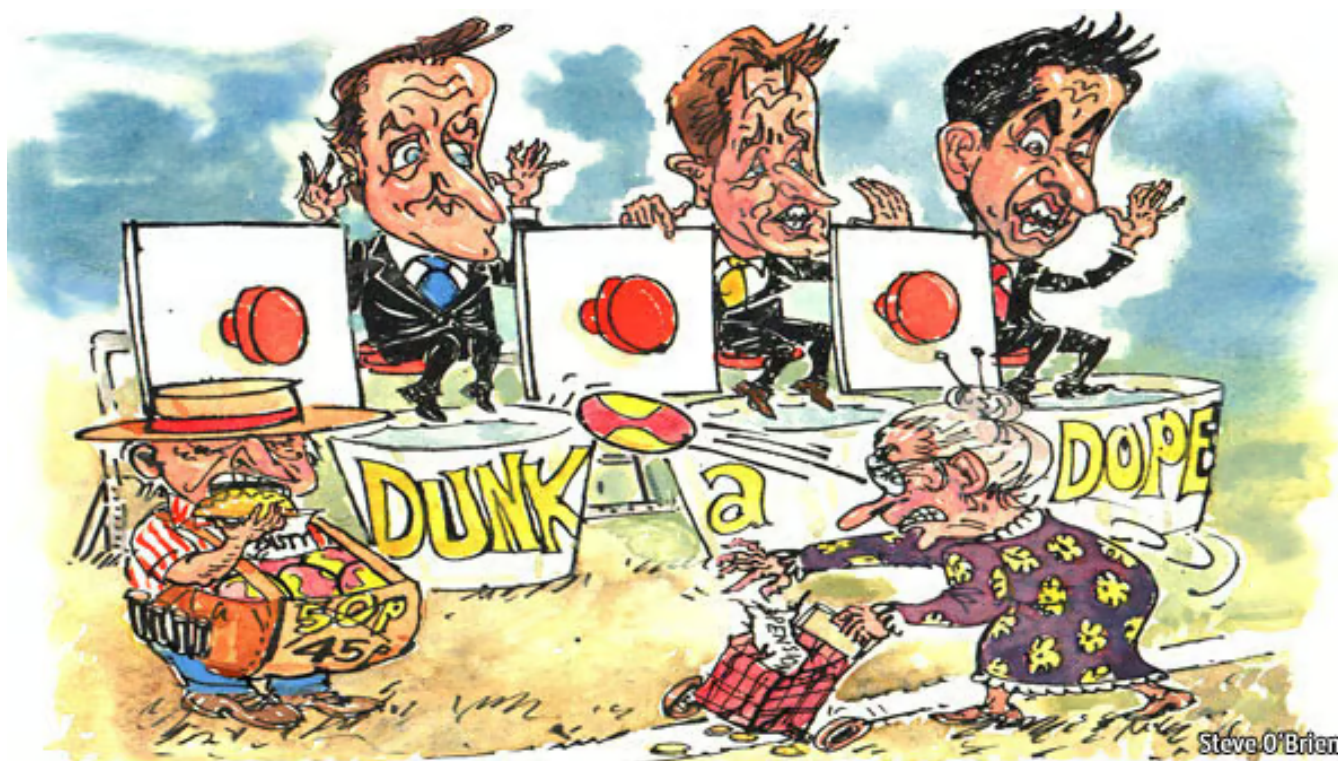
Britain | Bagehot

David Cameron is not too posh

The real lesson of a bad week for the Conservatives: voters are losing faith in politics

🔖 Save

🔗 Share



Apr 7th 2012 | 5 min read

our party has come to be seen as arrogant, selfish and—fatally—“out of touch”. The out-of-touch charge has rung in the ears of David Cameron and his closest ally, George Osborne, this week, after days of unforced errors. Lowlights included a party fund-raiser filmed allegedly offering access to ministers for donations, bungled preparations for a fuel-delivery strike and angry headlines about a budget that noisily cut the 50% top income-tax rate while sneakily raising tax on pensioners and hot bakery snacks (serious stuff: the British like their pasties).

The prime minister’s net approval rating, measured by the pollster YouGov, fell 16 points in a single week, to a record low of -27. Much advice has been offered by Tories in Parliament and by the press: cull the suave “chums of Dave” who fill Downing Street; hire a new party chairman; give more ministerial posts to northern or working-class MPs; ditch totems of party modernisation such as support for gay marriage, and focus on proper, Conservative policies like bashing Europe and slashing middle-class taxes. The most hostile grumbling has a personal edge. Mr Cameron and Mr Osborne were born into privilege, expensively educated, then wafted into government via stints in the back rooms of political power, it is argued. In short, they are toffs.

ADVERTISEMENT



We're there
growing it
with you at
every step

Explore our wealth
expertise



HSBC | Opening up a world of opportunity

Class is an appealingly simple explanation for the Conservatives’ current woes. It is also a red herring. Go back to the heavy-hitter quoted at the start, William Hague. His lament about arrogant, out-of-touch Conservatives comes from

vowels, never went to university). True, a startling number of old Etonians slope, languidly, around today's corridors of power. But the Conservative Party spent years led by impeccably classless, self-made men, and voters still told opinion polls that it was a party of the rich, for the rich.

None of this means that Mr Cameron and his team escape all blame for their present woes. Mr Osborne should have made the case for the painful bits of what was overall a prudent budget, rather than sneaking them out. Not for the first time, a crisis—in this case a threatened strike—has left ministers looking inept. On party funding, it is small comfort that voters think Labour just as sleazy as the Tories, and as likely to allow donors (in Labour's case, trade unions rather than millionaires) to influence policy.

But in truth Tory critics do not dislike the prime minister and Mr Osborne for being too posh. They like some people much posher than Mr Cameron, starting with the queen. Instead, Tory critics think that their party leaders are too grand, with a dash of liberal, metropolitan elitism. They first sensed disdain for grassroots Tory values when Mr Cameron sought to “rebrand” the party with pledges to fight climate change, increase overseas aid and embrace gay equality. Traditionalists suspect that Mr Cameron looks down on voters who prefer cheap energy bills to windmills, who think that charity begins at home and who feel unsettled rather than liberated by fast-changing moral codes.

ADVERTISEMENT

**ECONOMIST
ENTERPRISE**

prime minister's allies are certain the election was lost because the project of detoxifying the Tory brand was incomplete: people wanted change from Labour but did not trust the Conservatives to deliver it. On the right, the consensus is that the election was lost by talking too much about modernising gimmicks, and too little about core issues, such as immigration, tax or Europe.

It is a fallacy that "if only we'd been more robust on Europe or immigration, we'd have won," insists a senior ally of Mr Cameron's. Before the 2010 election, the Tories had a 39-point lead over Labour as the party trusted to reduce immigration, but led on economic competence by only 4% and trailed Labour on protecting the National Health Service by 3%. Tougher talk about securing the borders was not going to convince wavering voters.

The withering of the grassroots

More importantly, says the prime minister's ally, Cameron critics within the party are out of date to imagine that millions of natural Tories are out there waiting to be galvanised by a properly Conservative campaign. They have failed to grasp the big trend of recent years: that most voters are now floating to one degree or another, untethered to the mainstream parties.

The most alarming finding from focus groups conducted by the Conservative Party after last month's budget did not involve tax rates. It was that voters suspect that British budgets no longer much matter, because the country is just a little island buffeted by global forces. Most British fear their children will be worse off than they are. They are losing faith that governments can fix this.

An unprecedented 17% of voters told the latest YouGov poll that they favour non-mainstream parties. That "None of the Above" trend will matter long after rows about pasties are forgotten. It was underscored by a parliamentary by-election on March 29th in Bradford West, at which a safe Labour seat fell to George Galloway, an anti-war, hard-left populist who wooed Muslim voters and vowed to oppose all spending cuts.

Certainly, Mr Cameron and Mr Osborne need to show that they are in touch with the concerns of ordinary voters. Planned reforms to the welfare state, education and policing should help.

But a graver test looms An earlier Conservative critic once coined a deadly

cynical British voters that politicians have power to do much good at all.

[Economist.com/blogs/bagehot](https://www.economist.com/blogs/bagehot)

Explore more

Britain

+ Follow

→ See the latest from topics you follow

This article appeared in the Britain section of the print edition under the headline “David Cameron is not too posh”



From the April 7th 2012 edition

Discover stories from this section and more in the list of contents

➔ Explore the edition

🔖 Save

🔗 Share

🔄 Reuse this content



SUBSCRIBER ONLY | BLIGHTY

Stay informed with our weekly Britain newsletter

Analysing the challenges facing Britain and what needs to be done to overcome them

Sign up