Preventing the UK from going the way of the US

Draft v12

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Authors' Preface

We are increasingly concerned at the global tendency to retreat from democracy.

Countries like Turkey, Hungary, India and now America are all less democratic today than they were just a few years ago. Looking at the impact of President Trump's Project 2025, we fear for America's future. And America is a country with an established written constitution specifically designed to prevent tyranny.

That makes the question: *how do we stop something similar from happening in the UK?* vitally important.

This is the summary of a report, *Defensive Constitutional Reform,* which owes its genesis to President Trump's Project 2025. That report sets out the warning signs which indicate that the danger is real; it carries out a formal risk assessment of the probability and impact of a plan like Project 2025 being implemented in the UK; it explores a range of practical steps to mitigate that risk; and it assesses the likely impact of those mitigating steps.

The report does not attempt to address every constitutional weakness in our system: it is a pragmatic assessment of tactical steps the government could take within the next few years to protect the future of UK democracy and to safeguard the social contract within which all British citizens expect to be able to live their lives.

We urge the government to take this report seriously, and act on it urgently. This term is the opportunity to act; there may not be another opportunity.

Signatures and affiliations

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1. Executive summary

This report is the result of a project which owes its genesis to President Trump's Project 2025[1]. Reading the Project 2025 document showed us, even before Trump's second inauguration, that both US democracy and the US social contract were under serious threat. Closer to home, it made us ask: could a similar project be enacted in the UK?

Our reluctant conclusion is that it could, and we need to act quickly if we do not want to see that happen:

- **The UK is inadequately prepared** to defend its constitution: although there has been a great deal of discussion about progressive constitutional issues, most of it relies on the *'good chaps theory of government'* and would not be proof against bad actors in or close to power seeking to implement a plan like Project 2025. We need to develop a constitutional framework that recognise the potential for *bad actors* to seek and obtain power, and take steps to prevent that (see **Section 2** for more on defensive constitutional reform);
- **The scale of the threat is unacceptable.** In risk management circles, risk is defined by the equation: $Risk = Impact \times Probability$. Our assessment of Impact is that the implementation of such a plan in the UK would be devastating both to the state of our democracy and to the lives of many of our citizens; and it would be hard to reverse – generations of Britons' lives would be blighted. We assess the Probability of such an outcome (if no action is taken to mitigate the danger) as being of the order of 30-35%. **Without action, we are playing Russian roulette** with British democracy and with our social contract – but with two loaded chambers (see **Section 3** for details of our analysis);
- **We must act now** both to prevent hostile actors such as foreign states or wealthy individuals exploiting weaknesses in our democracy to seize power illegitimately and, because we cannot be sure of achieving that aim, to protect UK democracy and our social contract in the event that a government controlled by such actors does take power. We have set out potential mitigation actions which significantly reduce the risk, but do not eradicate it. We have also sketched a practical series of actions that the government could take now to enable these mitigation actions to happen (see **Section 4** for our recommendations).

Since our project was initiated, developments in the US have reinforced our concerns about what is happening there – and what could happen here. But there is still time to act. America had numerous warnings about what might happen if Trump were re-elected but took no special steps to prevent those things – relying on its existing Constitutional protections. The UK can learn from that mistake. We must.

[1] (Project 2025 Presidential Transition Project, 2023)

2. Why Defensive Constitutional Reform – and how

This section explains why the Trump regime in the US made us so concerned about the state of UK democracy, why there is a need to supplement the work of progressive constitutional reform with urgent action on *defensive* constitutional reform, and what approach is suited to tackling defensive constitutional reform.

Why the US worried us

What is happening today in the US is extremely concerning to many Americans. The Trump Administration, having denied[2] before the 2024 election that Project 2025 formed part of its plans, has proceeded energetically to implement it[3] with huge consequences for the US social contract, and the state of its democracy[4] by weakening democratic checks and balances, using state power against personal enemies, undermining the rule of law, suppressing dissent, and seeking to control the judiciary and the media. Trump has attacked[5] judges and lawyers who oppose him; he ignores court orders he does not like; he has built ICE into the largest US enforcement agency – bigger than the armed forces of all but 15 countries – and encouraged it to act anonymously and without following due process; he attacks media outlets which are critical and calls for the firing of journalists who criticise him or his policies; he attacks academic freedom and scientific rigour; he slashes benefits and healthcare for ordinary Americans to fund tax cuts for the wealthiest; and he threatens those he sees as his political enemies.

Figure 1: Fake video[6] posted by Trump: the arrest of Obama

As the *Financial Times* opined[7],

> *"It took years for Viktor Orbán to consolidate strongman rule in Hungary. Trump is trying to pull off an equivalent system-change within months."*

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[2] (Wendling, 2024)
[3] (Project 2025 Observer, 2025)
[4] (Pagel, 2025) (New York Times, 2025)
[5] (Thomas, What is Happening to America?, 2025)
[6] (Trump, NO ONE IS ABOVE THE LAW, 2025)
[7] (Luce, 2025)

The Trump regime also has major geo-political implications for the rest of the world, and severe environmental consequences.

The previous US administration had seen numerous warnings that its democracy faced an extraordinary threat[8], *but it took no special measures* to protect either US democracy itself or the US population from the risk of an oligarchic government whose interests were at odds with those of the American people. It relied on the strength of its constitution and the supposed separation of powers to provide the necessary protection. This now looks naïve.

The new US regime presents numerous challenges to the UK: how to respond to the Trump Tariffs, how to handle the US withdrawal from its historic role in the International Order in general and, in particular, how to handle the war in Ukraine.

We, however, were particularly concerned by another issue: *Could the UK also fall prey to a populist far-right party which establishes an oligarchic[9] government* and seeks to dismantle the UK's post-war social contract and replace what has been a functioning though imperfect democracy with what Lord Hailsham described[10] as an *'Elective Dictatorship'*? In this report, we have defined the term 'far-right' as follows:

> **Far-right**: *a party or individual who sets out to weaken or destroy vital public services such as state education or healthcare, weaken human rights legislation, or weaken or remove democratic safeguards such as free and fair elections or the separation of powers (so that politicians are no longer subject to the rule of law).*[11]

Our concern about the risk was heightened by the government's apparent position that constitutional protection is not an immediate priority.

Good chaps *vs* bad actors

Most constitutional work is *progressive* in nature – assuming that the UK is broadly a functioning democracy and exploring ways to make it function better. In the words of Lord Hennessy, it follows the *'good chaps theory of government'*[12] according to which the movers of British politics may occasionally be misguided, but they are fundamentally well-intentioned.

We have taken a different approach: our starting assumption, based on the warnings that we have already seen, is that bad actors within and outside the UK are keen to

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[8] (Thomas, UK Politics: It's Time for a New Lens, 2024)
[9] Oligarchy is government by the few, especially despotic power exercised by a small and privileged group for corrupt or selfish purposes. (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025)
[10] (Petley, 2019)
[11] (Thomas, What is Far Right?, 2025)
[12] (Hennessy, The Hidden Wiring, 1996)

disrupt our democracy in their own interests. Our concern is *defensive* constitutional reform.

A methodology for defensive constitutional reform

Which area of expertise is concerned with defending systems and the people they are designed to protect from bad actors? Information Systems Security is a well-developed example of such a discipline, so we have adapted the methodology of Information Systems Security to our task of defensive constitutional reform.

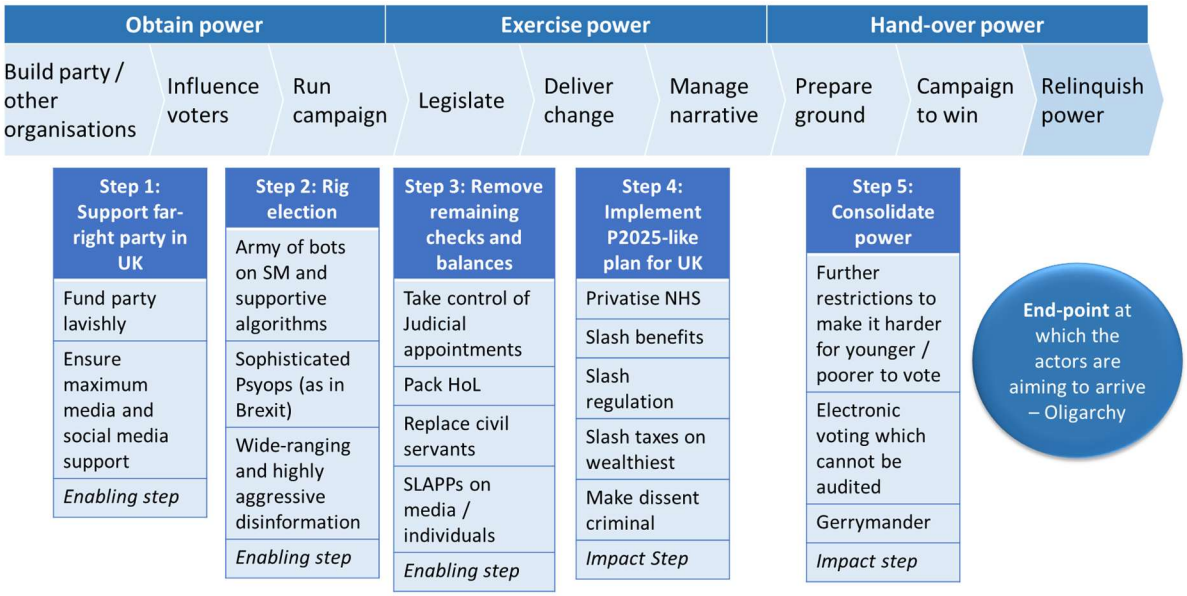
A typical Information Systems Security project would:

- **Identify the Threats** – probability and impact
- **Assess Vulnerabilities** given effectiveness of controls currently in place
- **Determine Risks** (Threats exploiting Vulnerabilities) and rank these according to probability and impact to drive prioritisation
- **Develop a Plan to mitigate the risks** – strategies; organisation; rules, policies and procedures; systems (e.g. access control, firewalls, intrusion detection); training and education; approach to monitoring, incident response and testing; and
- **Establish Three Lines of Defence** – first-line controls overseen by the risk owner (e.g. penetration tests); second-line assurance on behalf of the risk owner; and independent third-line audit (by the Internal Audit function).

In many attacks on Information Systems, exploiting a single vulnerability can be enough to enable bad actors to hack into a system and, for example, steal money; in the case of attacks on democracy, we are looking at scenarios playing out over a long time in which a *sequence* of steps is needed to take control of a country.

We have therefore defined a scenario as a sequence of steps, each of which exploits one or more vulnerabilities in our constitutional defences, with a clear end goal.

Figure 2: Structure of a scenario – illustrative example



In the example above, there are five key steps: some before seizing power, some after seizing power and some to avoid having to relinquish power. The first three steps are enabling steps: they do not themselves have a huge negative impact on the lives of UK citizens, *but they enable later steps which do*.

We have conducted our risk assessment at the level of scenarios.

3. The scale of the threat

This section explains more of the background to the threat to UK democracy, the specific scenarios whose risk we have assessed, the results of that risk assessment and the conclusions we draw from it.

The warnings we have already received

There have been numerous warnings about attempts to derail UK democracy:

- After Brexit, the British journalist Carole Cadwalladr revealed[13] the roles of Facebook and Cambridge Analytica in using sophisticated micro-targeting of tailored messages to voters during the Brexit campaign. She showed that, for the first time in UK politics, modern Psychological Operations[14] (PsyOps) techniques had been deployed against the British population and highlighted the risk to democracy this implied. Since then, the technology has advanced further, and the amount of data held on each of us has increased – but nothing has been done to prevent such PsyOps from being used in future elections. The Intelligence and Security Committee of the House of Commons warned us[15] of Russian interference in Brexit and called for a proper Inquiry – but there has been none;
- After May's government ran aground on Brexit, Johnson led a government which was not renowned for being systematic. But in one area it was both systematic and effective: removing checks and balances on its own power. It tackled everything[16] from the independence of the Electoral Commission and the ability of the courts to hold the government to account to the right of civil servants to give unbiased legal advice to ministers and of citizens to protest peacefully. Lord Clarke was moved to warn us[17] of a risk that the UK was dangerously close to becoming an elective dictatorship. And Dominic Cummings continues to call[18] for the destruction of *"the old political parties, the old Whitehall institutions, the old media, the old universities, the old courts."* There are clear echoes in this agenda of Project 2025;
- In late 2024, Musk offered $100m (around £78 million) – and the support of social media – to the Reform party. This would clearly be a game-changer for UK politics. As Lord Johnson, the Conservative Party Co-chair, remarked[19], it is extraordinary that Musk was *"basically buying one of the political parties here"*

[13] (Cadwalladr, 2019)
[14] (Bakir, 2020)
[15] (Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020)
[16] (Thomas, Saving Democracy, 2020)
[17] (Walker, 2021)
[18] (Cummings, 2025)
[19] (Rogers, 2025)

- More recently, a US-style Political Action Committee (PAC), GBPAC, has been set up[20] under the Chairmanship of Ben Habib with the aim of uniting and supporting the far-right in British politics;
- A new think tank, originally named *Resolute 1850*[21] after *HMS Resolute* whose timbers were used for the President's desk in the White House, and now renamed *Centre for a Better Britain*, has been set up to support Reform. This think tank, which is supported by US donors[22], is helping to prepare Reform for government[23] following the model of the Project 2025 planning done for Trump by think tanks including the Heritage Foundation;
- And Reform is actively seeking money from wealthy people mainly in tax havens outside Britain[24], not grass-roots funding from the UK population
- The new National Security Strategy of the USA[25] makes it clear that the Trump regime will actively seek to support far-right parties in Europe rather than the existing governments which it calls, *"unstable minority governments, many of which trample on basic principles of democracy to suppress opposition"*; and
- The new head of MI6, Blaise Metreweli, has warned[26] that we are now in a space between peace and war, and specifically mentioned threats from hostile foreign states and technology giants.

The idea that UK democracy is future-proof is not supported by the evidence.

Two key scenarios

There are many possible scenarios along the lines indicated in Figure 1, for example:

- Elon Musk, or a like-minded multibillionaire, could fund a far-right party either directly or via a PAC, and support it with his social media platform, probably also with support from most of the mainstream media, and possibly also Facebook, as well as Russia or another hostile state;
- During the election campaign – and well before the formal campaign started – the social media sites could use industrial-scale and highly targeted PsyOps; hostile states like Russia might also support this campaign;
- If by the time of the next election, the UK population were not persuaded that the current government had made a tangible improvement in their lives, voters could be persuaded to vote for a far-right leader who aligns politically with Trump[27] and Putin[28] without having been made aware of the plan he intended to implement (as the US population was persuaded to vote for Trump without fully appreciating

[20] (Shone, 2025) (Conley, 2025)
[21] (Barnett & Bright, 2025)
[22] (Gross, Reform UK figures plan Maga-style think-tank to build policy and attract US donors, 2025)
[23] (Wheeler, 2025)
[24] (Gross & Fisher, Reform UK heads offshore to raise funds from world's wealthy, 2025)
[25] (Trump, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2025)
[26] (Donaldson, 2025)
[27] (Self, Donald Trump is the 'bravest man that I know', says Nigel Farage, 2025)
[28] (Press Association, 2014)

the impact of Project 2025 – indeed even in July 2025, many Americans did not understand[29] what the President planned to do);

- Once a Prime Minister is in power, there are few effective checks and balances, and these could be further weakened;
- When the restraints are off, a far-right leader could implement a UK version of Project 2025, replacing the NHS with an insurance-based system[30], getting rid of all human rights and equality legislation[31], slashing taxes and benefits[32], and abandoning efforts to check climate change[33], etc;
- Finally he or she could consolidate power by using 'concerns' about (almost non-existent) voter fraud[34] to restrict the ability of those who might wish to vote him or her out of office.

Variants of this scenario which differ in detail but not in principle include:

- A different multi-billionaire funding the far-right party;
- A different hostile state actor supporting the far-right party's campaign;
- A new extremist party – there are other far-right parties and a new party of the Left – or a merger of Reform with the Conservatives[35] being the chosen vehicle.

We have consolidated these variants into a single scenario which we call, *'The Multi-billionaire-driven scenario.'*

The probability of this scenario materialising depends in part on whether voters are persuaded that the current government has delivered a tangible positive change to their lives and to the state of the country – *has it kept Sir Keir Starmer's promise of starting the job of national renewal?* For that reason, we have a second, related, scenario, *'the Neuter Labour scenario'*:

- Define boundaries for acceptable action (e.g. tax and spending cuts are acceptable, rises are not; rejoining the EU or single market is not acceptable; deregulation is acceptable, tightening regulations is not) – this is the 'Overton Window'[36];
- Get media to attack any hint of breaking out of the Overton Window;
- Donate to Labour on condition that they do not deviate;
- Praise (mildly) Labour whenever they create rules or red-lines compatible with the Overton Window; vilify (as harshly as possible) them as dangerously irresponsible/undemocratic if they seem to be contemplating deviant policies.

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[29] (Kane, 2025)
[30] (Grice, 2015)
[31] (Forsyth, 2025)
[32] (Dunton, 2024)
[33] (Wallace, 2024)
[34] (Chu, 2024)
[35] (Self, Senior Conservative says '70 per cent chance' of Reform-Tory merger before next election, 2025)
[36] (Wikipedia, 2025)

Risk assessment for the scenarios

Risk is defined as Probability x Impact. In this situation, both require some thought, and neither can be assessed with precision. Keynes said, *"It is better to be roughly right than precisely wrong"* – and that has been our approach.

Assessing Impact

For *Impact*, we have focussed on the ultimate effect of the scenarios on the well-being of British citizens and adopted a 5-point scale where the score depends both on the degree of impact and whether it is easily reversible.

Figure 3: Assessment of Impact

Insignificant	Minor	Moderate	Major	Severe
Minor (1-2%) **and** likely to be reversed within five years	**Either** material (3-5%) and unlikely to be reversed in five years **or** impact on wellbeing minor (1-2%) and unlikely to be reversed in ten years	**Either** significant (5-15%) and unlikely to be reversed in five years **or** impact on wellbeing material (3-5%) and unlikely to be reversed in ten years	**Either** very significant (greater than 15%) and unlikely to be reversed in five years **or** impact is significant (5-15%) and unlikely to be reversed in ten years	Very significant (greater than 15%) **and** unlikely to be reversed in ten years

The criteria[37] we have used to assess impact are:

- **Financial and Material Wellbeing** – will the British population be financially secure and able to live with dignity?
- **Health and Education** – will they be able to expect high quality healthcare and education as a right?
- **Free Society** – will they be free to criticise the government publicly without fear of retribution? Will they be free to vote?
- **Security** – will they be safe; will they be able to trust the Justice system?
- **Confidence for the Future** – will they have reasonable assurance that these things will remain true?

Assessing probability

For assessing *Probability*, as we are in uncharted territory, the approach of using historical relative frequency to assess probability would give answers which were

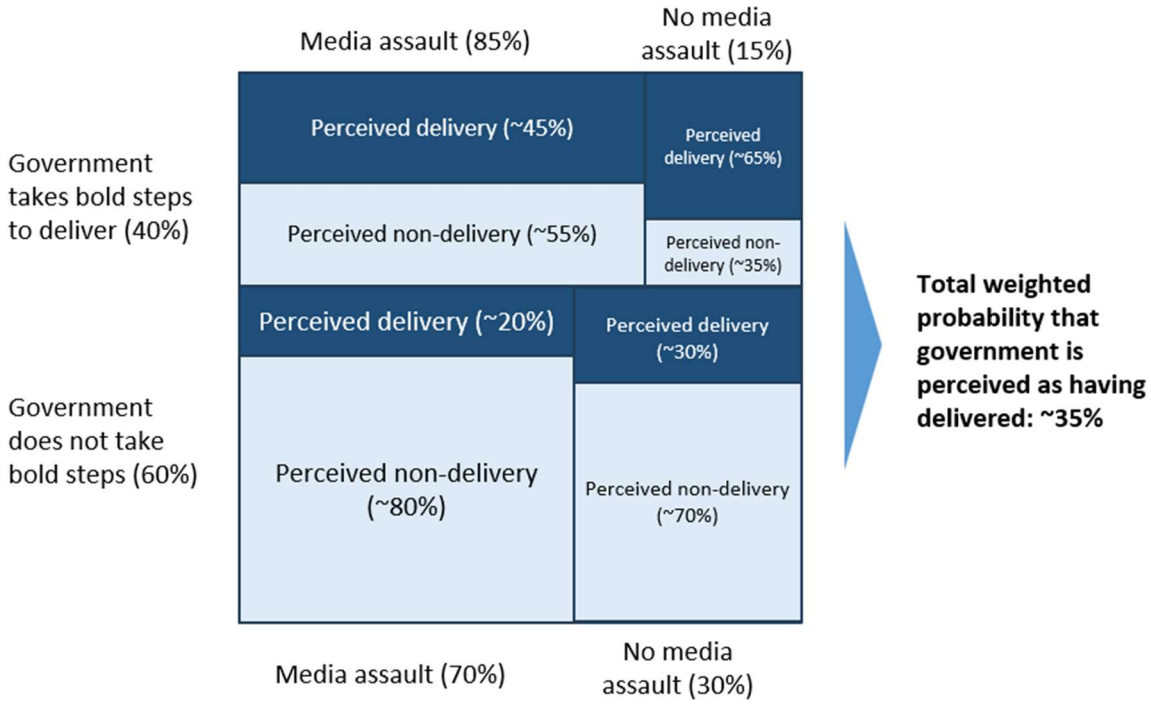
[37] See Appendix 1 for details

'*precisely wrong.*' For example, looking at the history of UK elections since the end of WWI would suggest that the chances of a governing party losing a 160+ majority are less than 10% – but to accept such a conclusion would be to ignore all the warning signs listed above.

The alternative approach is to use Bayesian probability, which allows for the (subjective) assessment of all the evidence which is available. For that reason, we have adopted the Bayesian approach, but rather than using mathematical formulas[38] to explain it, we have used a diagrammatic representation, which we hope is more accessible.

Here is the assessment of probability for the 'Neuter Labour' scenario. The proportion of the diagram shaded dark blue suggests that the probability of Labour being perceived to have delivered is low (~35%) – so the probability of it being neutered is high (~65%).

Figure 4: Probability of Labour being neutered



Our assessment was that if the government *does* take bold steps outside the Overton Window[39] (which would make it more likely that they can start to rebuild), there is an extremely high probability (~85%) that it will face a hostile reception in almost all the media, and that this will reduce the chances of it being *perceived* to have delivered to under 50% (~45%). In the unlikely event that it does not face a media assault, its chances of being perceived to have delivered would be much higher (~65%).

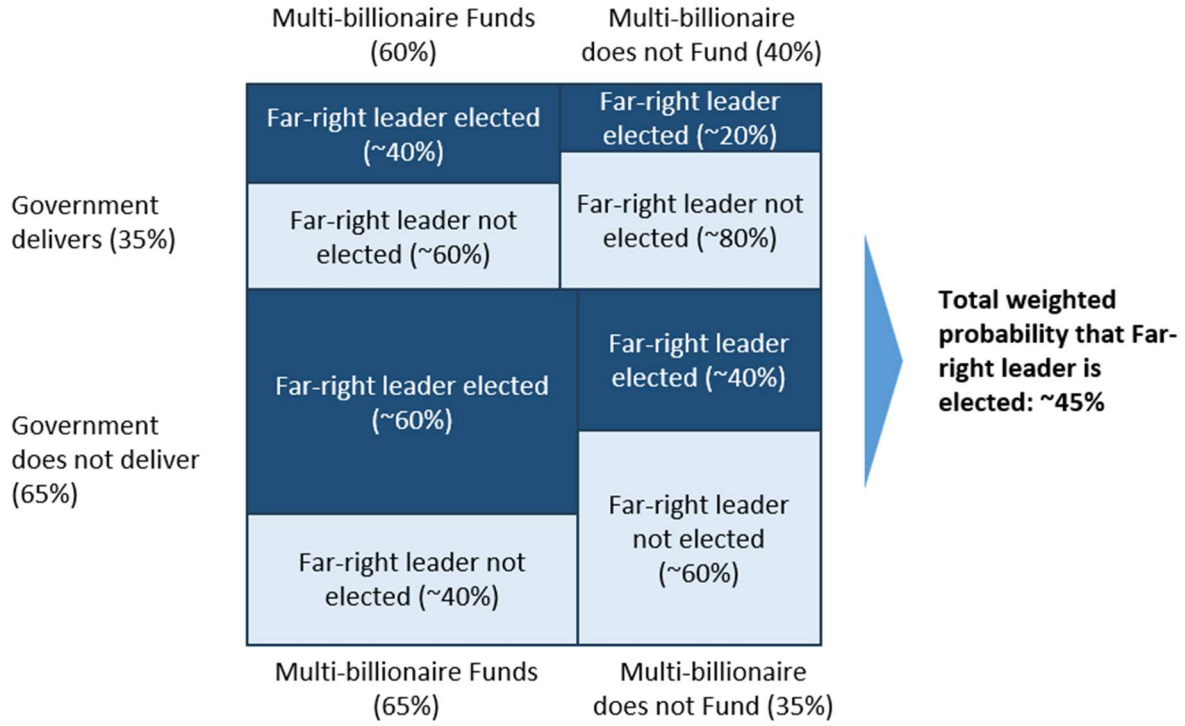
[38] We have relegated these to Appendix 2
[39] (Wikipedia, 2025)

Conversely, if the government sticks with its small target strategy and stays within the Overton Window (which would make it less likely that they can make significant steps forward), an attack is less likely, but still high (~70%) and as the chance of delivering is lower, the chances of being *perceived* to have delivered are very low (~20%). Even if there is no media assault (~30%), the chances of being perceived as having delivered would be low (~30%).

We have carried out sensitivity analysis to see how material changes in the assigned probabilities might be. This analysis suggests that even quite large differences in individual assigned probabilities make only a small difference to the outcome. For example, if we assume that, rather than it being *un*likely (~40%) as we have suggested, the government is *very* likely to go outside the Overton window (~70%), the probability that it will be perceived as having delivered rises but remains low (~40%).

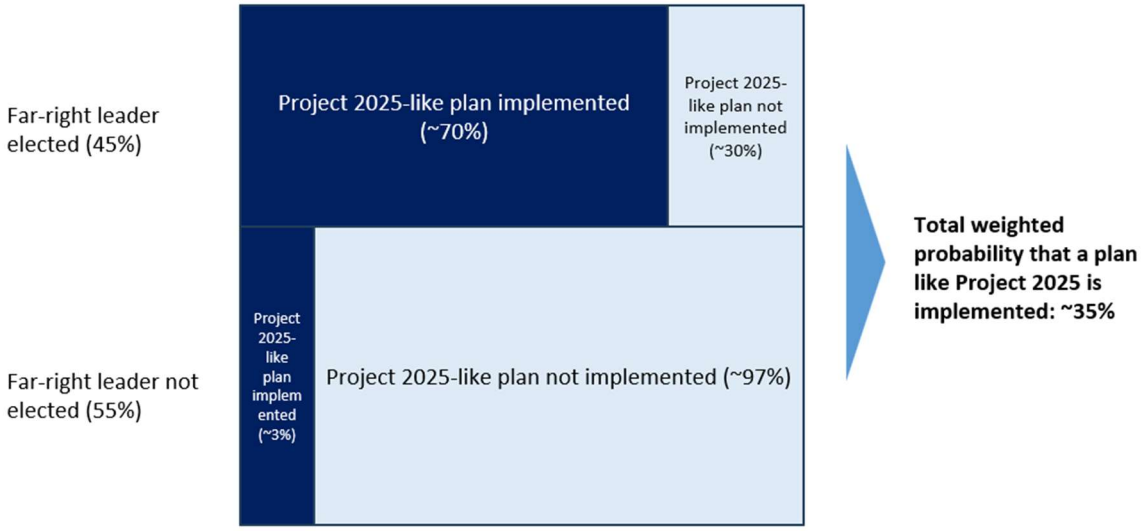
Given this assessment of the probability that Labour will be perceived as having delivered (~35%), the probability of an extremist leader being elected is moderate (~45%).

Figure 5: Probability of Extremist leader becoming PM



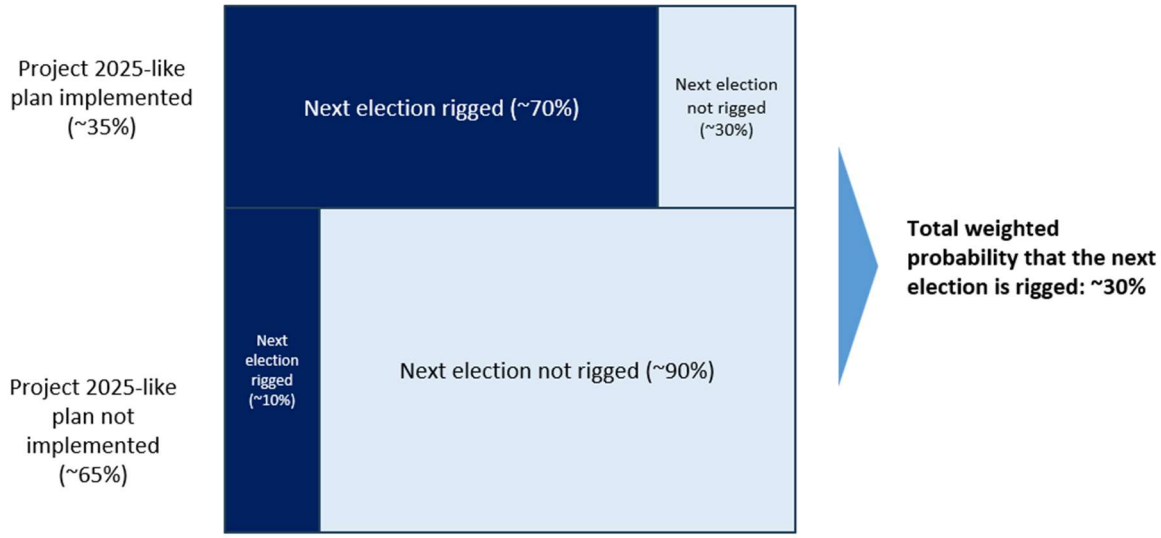
This in turn has a major influence on the probability of a plan like Project 2025 being implemented in the UK.

Figure 6: Probability of the UK suffering a plan like Project 2025



Finally, the chances of the UK becoming an elective dictatorship are estimated below.

Figure 7: Probability of future elections being rigged



Summary of Risk

Combining our probability and impact assessments gives a risk picture as below.

Figure 8: Risk to UK democracy and social contract

Risk = Probability x Impact	Impact on wellbeing	Insignificant	Minor	Moderate	Major	Severe
		Minor (1-2%) and likely to be reversed within ten years	Material (3-5%) and unlikely to be reversed in five years OR impact on wellbeing minor (1-2%) and unlikely to be reversed in ten years	Significant (5-15%) and unlikely to be reversed in five years OR impact on wellbeing material (3-5%) and unlikely to be reversed in ten years	Very significant (greater than 15%) and unlikely to be reversed in five years OR impact is significant (5-15%) and unlikely to be reversed in ten years	Very significant (greater than 15%) and unlikely to be reversed in ten years
Probability	(Factor)	1	2	3	4	5
Likely (>50%)	5	5	10	Labour neutered	20	25
Very possible (30-50%)	4	4	8	12	16	20
Possible (15-30%)	3	3	6	9	12	15
Unlikely (5-15%)	2	2	4	6	8	10
Highly unlikely (<5%)	1	1	2	3	4	5

Multi-billionaire driven scenario

The probability that Labour will not be seen to have delivered is quite high, and that in itself has a moderately serious impact on the UK population. But there is only a weak link between this outcome and the multi-billionaire scenario. Even if Labour is seen to deliver, the probability of that scenario remains high.

Russian roulette

The impact of the multi-billionaire driven scenario on the life of the average Briton is high and very difficult to reverse. Even though the probability is below 50%, this is a risk far too high to run.

If no mitigating actions are taken, we are playing Russian roulette with British democracy and with our post-war social contract – but with a probability of around 30-35%, it is like playing *Russian roulette with two loaded chambers*.

4. Tackling the threat

This section sets out the types of mitigating actions which would have an impact either *before* an oligarchic government could exploit weaknesses in our electoral system to seize power to make that less likely, or *after* it seizes power, to make it harder to carry out plans which are damaging either to the UK's democracy or to its social contract. It assesses how successful these mitigations might be in reducing the risk of the UK going the way of the US. Finally it sets out our suggested next steps for the UK Government.

Potential actions to prevent an oligarchic government seizing power

The most obvious mitigations may be:

- Delivering what the British people need and want, so that they do not vote for an extremist party out of desperation;
- Tackling dark money in politics;
- Tackling misinformation and disinformation; and
- Tackling direct interference in elections.

Each of these is discussed briefly below, and more details of the vulnerabilities they attempt to address are set out in Appendix 3.

Delivering for the British people

The most obvious way to avoid an extremist government being elected at the next election might seem to be simply to deliver a tangible sense that national renewal is underway, and people can expect their lives to improve year-on-year.

This would require, at minimum, tackling voter's top two issues[40]: ending the cost-of-living crisis so that people feel that their disposable income is increasing faster than inflation; and producing a noticeable improvement in public services, particularly the NHS. Many voters now also see immigration as a key issue, along with asylum seekers crossing the channel, levels of crime, affordable housing and tackling climate change.

This would be a daunting challenge for any government, and early indications are that this government may not be on track to deliver, even against the first two issues. Nevertheless, it appears that the government is relying primarily on delivery[41] as its means of holding off the election of an extremist party.

Tackling dark money

Tackling dark money should be uncontroversial: the Labour manifesto promised[42] to *"protect democracy by strengthening the rules around donations to political parties."* And the new policy paper[43] contains plans which will have a positive impact, once implemented. But stopping dark money is easier said than done. First there is the

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[40] (More in Common, 2025)
[41] (Starmer, 2025)
[42] (Labour Party, 2025)
[43] (UK Government, 2025)

natural resistance that all parties feel to see the level of potential donations reduced – this is a weakness in the current proposals. Secondly, in an interconnected world with hard-to-track payments systems like crypto-currencies, it could be hard to show that rules had been infringed. Thirdly, the money might not be given directly to the party itself or to an officially-connected organisation but to a formally unconnected third-party that happens to support the extremist (or other) party in question. In effect this is giving benefits in kind rather than cash. And finally, unless they are increased significantly, the fines that can be levied for breach might be dwarfed by the donations – they could be just a minor cost of buying power.

Tackling disinformation

Tackling disinformation is intrinsically even harder: it is necessary because of the enormous power of the media and social media[44] to shape the views of the public – but this also makes it a politically extremely difficult challenge. With high probability, any attempt to restrict disinformation in the media by insisting that falsehoods should not recklessly be publicised, that there should be balance in the coverage given to political parties, etc, would be denounced as an infringement of their rights of free speech and portrayed as an attempt to introduce draconian state control of the media. With social media, which is now also an immensely powerful force, the difficulty might be even greater.

Even merely ensuring that the BBC does not implicitly support an extremist outcome[45] would require careful handling. Even replacing the Director General with a politically neutral figure might be enough to provoke a media assault (of a kind which was not visible when the incumbent was put in post).

To be successful, any attempt to tackle disinformation must work hard to ensure political legitimacy – eg through a public inquiry and an appointments commission – and this means that it would not be quick or easy.

Tackling election interference

Other forms of election interference, such as intimidation, vote-buying, disruption of counts, etc which we have seen in the US, have not yet been an issue in the UK. There would probably be less resistance to increasing the penalties for such activities.

But even with mitigating actions, the safeguards will not be perfect, and the risk remains that a bad actor could manipulate the system and be elected with a working majority. This brings us to ask what could be done to minimise the damage that such a government could do.

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[44] (YouGov, 2025)
[45] (Bienkov, 2025)

Potential actions to prevent an oligarchic government from harming the UK

The areas in which we believe protections may be possible to restrict the power of an elected government to behave undemocratically are:

- Clarifying constitutional duties, rights and freedoms;
- Safeguarding separation of powers; and
- Entrenchment through supermajority requirements and Three Lines of Defence.

Each of these is discussed briefly below, and more details of the vulnerabilities they attempt to address are set out in Appendix 4.

Constitutional duties, rights and freedoms

While we have legislation on Human Rights, for example, it is not given constitutional status. In principle, it would be as easy to repeal the Human Rights Act[46] as it would be to repeal the Self-build and Custom Housebuilding Act[47]. A first protective step would be to define, and get as much cross-party consensus as possible on:

- A short-list of legislation that should be considered constitutional which should include preserving limits on the right of a Prime Minister to prorogue Parliament to avoid scrutiny; and
- A short-list of constitutional duties of a government – eg to uphold the constitution, to govern on behalf of the British people as a whole rather than a small and powerful minority, to protect democracy, etc.

Separation of powers

The existence of checks and balances depends on there being actors who can place restraints on the Prime Minister's exercise of power. And that in turn depends on their being separation of powers which cannot easily be unwound. In the US, we have seen that Trump's regime has tried, largely successfully, to neuter those who might stand in his way: civil servants have been sacked and replaced by loyalists; the Supreme Court is stacked with Trump's appointees; law firms and newspapers are increasingly ceding to his demands. A determined Prime Minister could do the same in the UK.

Potential solutions could start with placing limits on Prime Ministerial patronage – an independent appointments body could appoint senior positions in the Judiciary, Civil Service, the BBC and Academia. The ability of the Prime Minister to appoint members of the House of Lords[48] could similarly be replaced either by elections or by an independent Appointments Commission. The Electoral Commission should also be independent of Ministerial interference. We could provide longer term funding (rather than annual settlements) to regulators and vital institutions. And we could allow Parliament to set its own agenda: establish a House Business Committee which allows

[46] (UK Government, 1998)
[47] (UK Government, 2015)
[48] See for example (Rusbridger, 2023)

Parliament, rather than the government, to determine what is debated in Parliament and when.

But a bad actor as Prime Minister could systematically unwind all these protections. So, more would be needed.

Fortunately, it is not only constitutional changes that could help stave off a broken democratic future. Other practical measures could be taken. An example of the power of such measures is the creation of the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR). As Osborne[49] said when launching the OBR,

> *"I recognise that this will create a rod for my back down the line,* ***and for the backs of future chancellors****."*

Although it is a constitutional convention[50] in the UK that no parliament can bind a future parliament, Osborne found a practical institutional mechanism to circumvent this stricture.

One such possibility is what we call constitutional Prometheanism[51]: the mutual protection of the independent actors – if the Prime Minister sought to co-opt the Judiciary, for example, the remaining powers would unite in opposition, using procedural barriers and raising public awareness of the risk of slipping into dictatorship.

Entrenchment through supermajority requirements and Three Lines of Defence

The fundamental issue is that an elected Prime Minister with a workable majority could force through legislation unwinding any or all the safeguards described above. For that reason, we propose that changes to the constitutional safeguards set out above should require a super-majority[52] in the House of Commons: a two thirds majority. These proposals do not violate the convention that no government can pass laws that a future government cannot change; and according to that principle, this government cannot be prevented by previous governments from introducing such constitutional defences in the UK.

Even this kind of entrenchment would not be an absolute safeguard: the Electoral Calculus[53] estimate of the results of an election held tomorrow (as of October 2025) give a range for Reform of between 154 and 413 seats. The upper end of that range would be close to the supermajority requirement: a Prime Minister with such a majority would only need to retain control over his or her own party to push through any desired legislation.

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[49] (Osborne, 2010)
[50] (UK Parliament, 2025)
[51] In Greek mythology, Prometheus's defiance of Zeus was a symbol of resistance to despotic authority. In the early 1900s, the term Prometheanism was used to suggest that Russia's neighbours around the Baltic, Black and Caspian seas might unite in mutual defence against Russian imperialism.
[52] Such as the supermajority requirement in the Scotland Act (Scotland Act 1998, 1998)
[53] (Electoral Calculus, 2025)

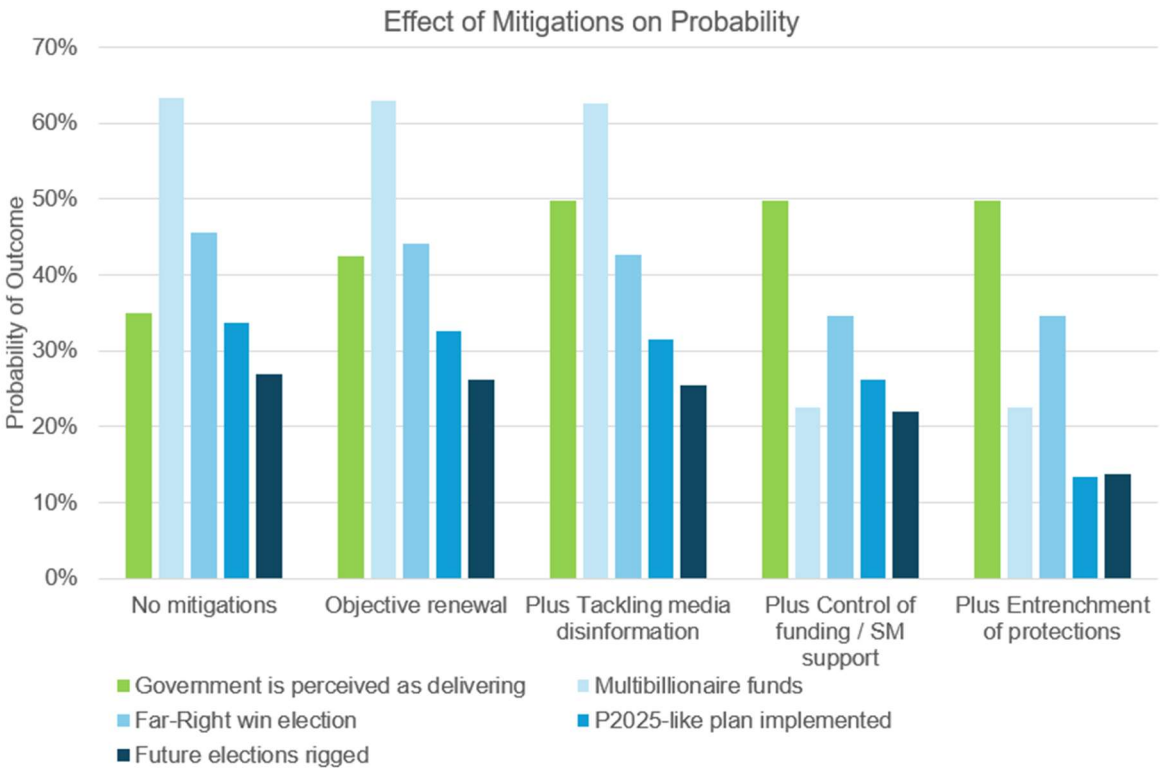
For that reason, we propose also introducing the concept of Three Lines of Constitutional Defence[54]: Operational, Oversight and Compliance; and Independent Assurance.

Assessment of mitigations

Risk is the product of *Impact x Probability*. The impact of a Project 2025-like plan being implemented is, as we can already see in the US, extremely damaging. The probability of it being implemented depends on what mitigations are put in place.

The discussion above suggests that 100% mitigation is impossible. In assessing the impact of mitigation, we have therefore assumed that each of the recommendations above will be only partially successful in achieving its goals. (More optimistic assumptions would of course lead to a greater predicted effect).

Figure 9: Assessment of mitigations



Based on these assumptions, taking all the steps set out above will make a material difference to the probability of an outcome which could damage both the UK's social contract and the health of its democracy – **reducing the probability of a P2025-like plan being implemented in the UK from around 33% to a little over 10%**. But, even in combination, these mitigation actions do not reduce the probability to a level that should be considered acceptable.

For that reason, we also consider a more fundamental change: moving to a system of proportional representation (PR). Under first past the post, it is very common that a

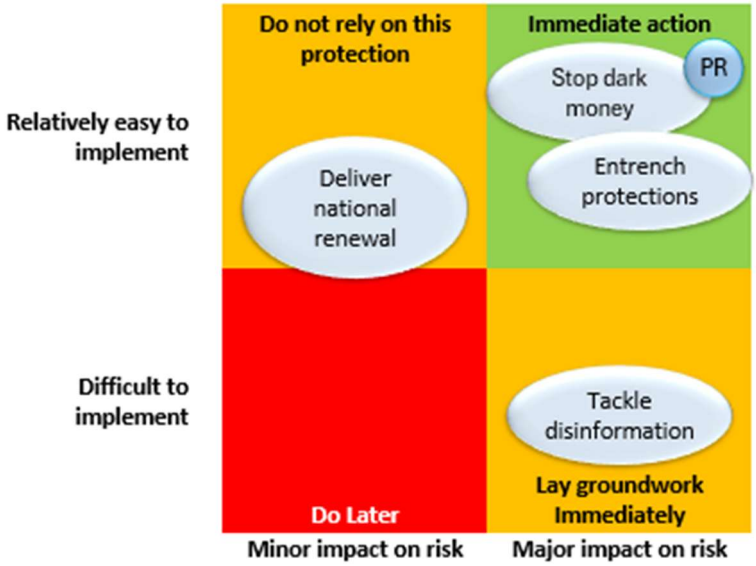
[54] See Appendix 5 for details

minority of votes won can give a large majority in Parliament. The 2024 election[55], for example, saw Labour win 411 seats out of 650, a majority of 172, on just 34% of the vote. With such a majority, a bad actor in government can push through almost any legislation.

At the time of writing (15/10/25), Electoral Calculus[56] predicts that if an election were held today, Reform would win just 30.4% of the votes but take over 300 seats. A move to a PR system, following a Royal Commission (as proposed by the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Fair Elections[57]) would leave Reform with 30.4% of the seats – the largest single party, but not in a position to drive through the kind of legislation currently being passed in the US. This would be a further material safeguard.

In summary, the options we recommend are set out in Figure 10, below.

Figure 10: Assessment of mitigation options



Even if all these steps are enacted, Britain will still be uncomfortably vulnerable[58] – *but far less so than today.*

So what would a responsible government do now?

Immediate next steps

We suggest the following immediate steps:

1. Validate our risk assessment to verify that the case for change is correct and fully understood by policy-makers;

[55] (House of Commons Library, 2024)
[56] (Electoral Calculus, 2025)
[57] (APPG for Fair Elections, 2025)
[58] See for example *Democracy SOS* (Tam, 2025) for comprehensive analysis of weaknesses and actions – some of them longer term – which will be needed to future-proof our democracy.

2. Build political consensus among mainstream parties to create a united front for action;
3. Set up a powerful cross disciplinary team (Inquiry) to refine the recommended actions and plan their implementation;
4. Define and implement controls on dark money, set up Royal Commissions on voting and on media regulation; and
5. Develop and implement powerful communications strategy.

Each of these points is expanded on below.

Validate risk assessment

This report makes some suggestions that appear radical. Radical change is not something to be undertaken lightly; but nor should it be shunned if the need is clear. This hinges on two questions:

1. Is what is happening today in America a serious threat to US democracy and the social contract according to which US citizens live their lives?
2. Without taking mitigating actions, is the probability of something similar happening to UK citizens unacceptably high?

It would not be difficult for a cross-disciplinary team drawn from the Foreign Office and other relevant departments and services and chaired by the National Security Advisor to assess these two questions in a matter of weeks. A formal report from such a team and an appropriate addition to the National Risk Register would carry much weight in overcoming natural and, in other circumstances, healthy, resistance to action.

Build political consensus among mainstream parties

Any constitutional changes will be suspect. A cross-party consensus will both reduce political resistance and reassure the UK population that the changes are not themselves an attempt to corrupt and control the system.

Set up powerful cross disciplinary team (Inquiry)

The issues raised are both deep and wide ranging: no single area of expertise is enough to address the challenges. We recommend setting up a powerful cross-disciplinary team with expertise ranging from the dark arts of propaganda and PsyOps, through politics to constitutional law. If possible, the team should include representatives from a range of political backgrounds – there are individuals from most parties who share these concerns.

This team should run a Constitutional Defence Project/Inquiry to determine the optimal set of mitigations to be taken and to set out a plan for their implementation.

Implement controls on dark money, set up Royal Commissions on voting and on media regulation

Some of the team's recommendations would probably be straightforward to implement – eg far stricter controls on dark money – but others would be intrinsically more

challenging. It might be necessary to set up Royal Commissions on voting and on media regulation, for example.

Develop and implement powerful communications strategy

Most of the UK public are not aware of the gravity of what is happening in the US, and, to many people, the idea of defensive constitutional reform may seem alarmist or even dangerous. The government should develop a comprehensive communications strategy to ensure that people in the UK understand the reality of the US experience and the cost to UK citizens should something similar happen here.

Without that, implementing the safeguards we have recommended will be difficult and unpopular.

3. Conclusions

This project was initiated before Trump was inaugurated as President, because the warning signs contained in Project 2025 were, on their own, extremely concerning. In the ten months that he has been in power, Trump has worked fast and aggressively to implement Project 2025. While there has been resistance in the US, from the courts, from a few in the media, from politicians outside the Republican Party and from some members of the public; and while Trump's approval ratings have slumped, the indications are that our fears were justified: Trump is on course to unwind many of the safeguards in the US constitution and many of the elements of the US social contract which date back to the New Deal. And many of the US population will suffer greatly from that.

The impact of a Project 2025-like plan is at least as great as we feared it might be when we began this project. The probability of such a thing happening here is also at least as high; judging by recent UK polls, it is higher. The risk (the product of impact and probability) to the UK is therefore unacceptably high: if we do nothing, we run a significant risk of both UK democracy and the UK's social contract being unwound.

Fortunately, there is still time to act. The government can learn from the US experience and take steps now to ensure that historians will not view Sir Keir Starmer as they are likely to view Joe Biden: a well-meaning but over-cautious leader who took no effective steps to protect his country from the risks of dictatorship.

In this report, we have set out our assessment of the risks involved and the vulnerabilities which the UK needs to address. We have also illustrated a set of mitigations which will significantly reduce the risk to which our country is exposed.

As Lord Hailsham put it[59], after warning of the risks of the UK succumbing to elective dictatorship, *"My object is continuity and evolution, not change for its own sake. But my conviction remains that the best way of achieving continuity is by a thorough reconstruction of the fabric of our historic mansion. It is no longer wind- or weather-proof. Nor are its foundations still secure."*

It is now over to this government to act.

[59] (Tyler, 2021)

Appendices

Appendix 1: Methodology for probability assessment

Appendix 2: Methodology for impact assessment

Appendix 3: Need for mitigation before an extremist government seizes power

Appendix 4: Need for mitigation after an extremist government comes to power

Appendix 5: Need for mitigation in relation to handing over power

Appendix 6: Three lines of Constitutional Defence

Appendix 7: References

Appendix 8: Contributors

Appendix 1: Methodology for impact assessment

Why wellbeing?

This report advocates for defensive constitutional reform and tackles the risks to the UK's social contract and to our democracy. And this poses the question: *how can we assess the impact of failing democracy?* Democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and equality under it, for example, all have immense intrinsic value, and these are clearly directly threatened in the various scenarios examined in this report. But when we come to ask questions like w*hy do we value democracy? what is wrong with a strong-man leader who can sweep aside all opposition? why is it vital that we have fair elections?* the answers all relate to the impact on the UK population.

We chose to focus on wellbeing to make it clear to the reader that the impact of the scenarios examined would have a personal impact on them and the people they know and care about. Many in the UK are struggling to fulfil basic needs, for example, 30% of children in the UK are living in poverty[60], and when one is struggling to feeds one's children, abstract, albeit immensely valuable, ideals such as democracy and the rule of law are less likely to motivate an appropriate sense of alarm at the risks facing the UK.

Additionally, when people are struggling, political extremes, such as the ones examined in this report, can seem more desirable, particularly if advocates of these extremes promise to solve people's day-to-day struggles. As Stevkovski[61] pointed out, during times of economic hardship *"one feature marks all right-wing extremists: the attempt to use the fear of the citizens. They rely on the dissatisfaction of the citizens from the current social and political situation; they offer simple answers for complex problems derived from the economic crisis, unemployment and the social insecurity."*

Therefore we wanted to make it clear to the reader that the very solutions that many might instinctively reach for to solve the problems many people in the UK are facing, such as poverty, would actually make those problems worse.

It should be noted that none of this is to deny that the damage the scenarios examined in this report would do to abstract ideals, such democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and so on, is not also reason enough to act to prevent them. For most people, the fact that something is a threat to democracy, for example, in and of itself gives us plenty of reason to act to prevent it. That said, the wellbeing of UK citizens and residents also gives us plenty of reason to act, as this report amply demonstrates.

Why these aspects of wellbeing?

[60] (Brown, Child poverty: Statistics, causes and the UK's policy response, 2025)
[61] (Stevkovski, 2015)

Wellbeing is multifaceted and different thinkers at different times and in different cultures have thought about it in different ways. Why, then, did we focus on the aspects of wellbeing we did?

The answer is simply that we wanted to find a working account of wellbeing detailed and specific enough for our purposes (given constraints on time and space) whilst also being widely acceptable. The aspects of value we have selected here are drawn primarily from philosophical accounts of wellbeing, particularly Aristotelian natural law accounts[62] and the capabilities approach[63], but they are also entirely compatible with other philosophical accounts of wellbeing such as hedonistic and desire satisfaction theories[64]. Additionally, our account of wellbeing should also be compatible with psychological (as opposed to philosophical) accounts of wellbeing, such as Maslow's hierarchy of needs[65] and Ryff's Six-factor model of psychological well-being[66].

Based on these considerations, we decided to focus on the following criteria:

- **Financial and Material Wellbeing** – will the British population be financially secure and able to live with dignity?
- **Health and Education** – will they be able to expect high quality healthcare and education as a right?
- **Free Society** – will they be free to criticise the government publicly without fear of retribution? Will they be free to vote?
- **Security** – will they be safe; will they be able to trust the Justice system?
- **Confidence for the Future** – will they have reasonable assurance that these things will remain true?

And we created the assessment framework set out in Figure 2.

As a result, regardless of the finer details of how one conceptualizes wellbeing, our report demonstrates that should the various scenarios we have examined come to pass, there will be a negative impact on the wellbeing of UK citizens and residents. This gives us reason to try to prevent them from happening.

[62] (Playford, 2019)
[63] (Nussbaum, 2011)
[64] (Crisp, 2025)
[65] (Maslow, 1943)
[66] (Ryff, 1989)

Appendix 2: Methodology for probability assessment

We have conducted our assessment at the level of scenarios where, as explained in Section 2, we have defined a scenario as a sequence of steps, each of which exploits one or more vulnerabilities in our constitutional defences, with a clear end goal.

There are two issues we need to address in our assessment of probability:

1. Many of the events we need to consider are new threats of the kind which have not taken place before in sufficiently similar circumstances and large enough numbers for us to simply look at the data and compute relative frequencies – so we need to have a way of making reasoned subjective **estimates of the probabilities of individual events**;
2. The probability of events later in the sequence depends on whether the events earlier in the sequence have taken place – so we need to have a way of **chaining the probabilities**.

Estimating the individual event probabilities

We need to be roughly right, rather than precisely wrong, which means we need to use what is called Bayesian probability (which also means that we can update our conclusions as new evidence becomes available).

In some cases, there will be valuable quantified evidence we can take into account: in the case of the next election result, we can take account of the Electoral Calculus prediction[67] (in October 2025) that there is a 78% chance that Reform will be the largest single party (vs 19% for Labour). But even so, we cannot simply rely on the Electoral Calculus result as it is based on current and historic polls and election results, fluctuates widely, and does not specifically consider the scenarios we are worried about.

In other cases, which may still be important, there may be no quantified data to guide us.

To guide our thinking, we have used a simple framework, based on the concept of means, motive and opportunity, as shown below.

Issue	Factors to consider
Means	• Money • Human and other resources
Motive	Desire to take this action: • Fit with moral framework

[67] (Electoral Calculus, 2025)

	• Personal benefit
Opportunity	Lack of barriers: • Legal • Institutional • Publicity / public opinion

If we consider event **O**: The Labour government is prepared to step outside the Overton window in its determination to deliver a public perception of national renewal, we might say:

- **Means**: (score: moderate)
  - The government *could* step outside the Overton window, but this would mean reversing some very public statements about the inviolability of the current set of fiscal rules (which is now the tenth set of immutable fiscal rules[68] in the UK) and this would be politically difficult;
  - Alignment with EU would require EU agreement;

- **Motive**: (score: moderate to high)
  - Delivering renewal would fit with the moral framework of those in the cabinet
  - It would also be very much in their personal and political interests;
  - The Chancellor would, however, also have strong motives for not changing the rules;

- **Opportunity**: (score: low)
  - There are no legal barriers;
  - There are serious institutional barriers which they are not yet addressing[69];
  - There would be a media onslaught if they took some of the steps necessary – eg borrowing more, taxing the wealthiest or direct money financing – and this might swing public opinion;
  - As Trump's tariffs bite and we approach the next election, this risk may seem worth taking.

On that basis, we have assessed the probability as low-to-moderate and assigned a value of around 35% (in Section 3) to that event.

We have assessed the other individual probabilities in the same way.

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[68] (Pope, Hourston, & Sangha, 2024)
[69] (Thomas, Re-wiring for Progress, 2024)

Chaining the probabilities

In our *multi-billionaire driven scenario*, the key events are:

- **D** – the current government is perceived as having **D**elivered – this is the context for the scenario;
- **M** – a **M**ultibillionaire decides to fund an extremist UK party and support it with social media;
- **F** – an extremist party wins the next election;
- **P** – the extremist party implements a UK version of **P**roject 2025;
- **V** – the extremist party consolidates power by manipulating the **V**oting system so that it will win future elections.

Let us start by looking at the probability $p(M)$ of event M, which depends on whether or not D happens. This means we need the concept of conditional probability: the probability of M given that D has happened, written $p(M|D)$. This is defined as

$$p(M|D) = \frac{p(M \cap D)}{p(D)}$$

Where $M \cap D$ means M *and* D have both happened. We also need to consider the probability that D does *not* happen: this is written $p(\neg D) = 1 - p(D)$

Since $M \cap D$ and $M \cap \neg D$ are exclusive events, we have

$$p(M) = p(M \cap D) + p(M \cap \neg D)$$

$$= p(M|D).p(D) + p(M|\neg D).p(\neg D)$$

We can plug in the numbers we used in Section 3: $p(D) = 35\%$, $p(M|D) = 60\%$ and $p(M|\neg D) = 65\%$, to get

$$p(M) = p(M|D).p(D) + p(M|\neg D).p(\neg D) = 60\%.35\% + 65\%.65\% = 63\%$$

If we now look at assessing the probability of event F, we can use similar reasoning:

$$\begin{aligned} p(F) = p(F \cap M \cap D) + p(F \cap \neg M \cap D) + p(F \cap M \cap \neg D) + p(F \cap \neg M \cap \neg D) \\ = p(F|M \cap D).p(M \cap D) + p(F|\neg M \cap D).p(\neg M \cap D) \\ + p(F|M \cap \neg D).p(M \cap \neg D) + p(F|\neg M \cap \neg D).p(\neg M \cap \neg D) \\ = p(F|M \cap D).p(M|D).p(D) + p(F|\neg M \cap D).p(\neg M|D).p(D) \\ + p(F|M \cap \neg D).p(M|\neg D).p(\neg D) + p(F|\neg M \cap \neg D).p(\neg M|\neg D).p(\neg D) \end{aligned}$$

To calculate the probability of an extremist party winning the next election, we need to estimate the conditional probabilities. Let us say they are as follows:

$$p(F|M \cap D) = 40\%$$

$$p(F|\neg M \cap D) = 20\%$$

$$p(F|M \cap \neg D) = 60\%$$

$$p(F|\neg M \cap \neg D) = 40$$

If we plug these numbers into the formula above, we get

$$p(F) = 46\%$$

And if we assume that the implementation of a UK version of Project 2025 is heavily dependent on an extremist leader being elected, say

$$p(P|F) = 70\%$$

$$p(P|\neg F) = 3\%$$

Then we would get

$$p(P) = 34\%$$

On these assumptions, there is a greater than 1 in 3 chance of what is happening to America happening here *if no mitigating actions are taken*.

Finally, if we assume that the consolidation of power is far more likely for a government which has implemented a UK version of Project 2025, say

$$p(V|P) = 70\%$$

$$p(V|\neg P) = 10\%$$

Then we would get

$$p(V) = 30\%$$

This is a more formal version of the diagrammatic presentation in Section 3.

Reliability of the results

Although there is no way of precisely determining the probabilities we need to consider, we have carried out sensitivity analysis to see whether it matters if we are slightly wrong. The results of this sensitivity analysis are that changing individual probabilities even by quite significant amounts has little effect on the chained probabilities that we are most interested in.

We therefore feel confident that our overall conclusion: that we are – if no mitigations are put in place – playing Russian roulette with British democracy is sound.

Appendix 3: Need for mitigation before an extremist government seizes power

Part 1: Build Organisation

Vulnerabilities

Dark Money

Concerns have been raised over the growing influence of the wealthy within British politics. This is no new issue, with corruption and wealth being long-standing issues and the subject of frequent scandals; aided by the little and vague electoral law on the matter which only apply to donations over £500. Malpractice is widespread and not limited to one side of the aisle: a 2024 investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism showed that nearly all major parties failed to accurately report donations[70]. There is no limitation on the maximum donation, so long as it is legally and accurately reported to the Electoral Commission.

It is illegal for foreign nationals or companies to donate to parties or campaigns[71]. However, UK-based shell companies may still donate money to parties or campaigns even if the money comes from abroad. A House of Commons library report identified four ways in which foreign money can enter UK politics: foreign companies, overseas voters, unincorporated associations (which are an *"Association of individuals who have come together to carry out a shared purpose"*), and funding for overseas visits[72].

Think tanks and lobbying organisations are not restricted by the regulations which affect parties, as they are usually charities and regulated as such. While this does restrict the party-political activity of the think tank, it leaves them open for irregular donations[73].

Cryptocurrencies

The guidance for parties surrounding the permissibility of cryptocurrency donations from the Electoral Commission constitutes four sentences, one of which explains what they are. Current guidelines state that cryptocurrency is permitted, so long as it fulfils all other rules, such as reporting donations valued over £500, and sufficient information can be gathered to check permissibility. Considering how charities often use cryptocurrencies to move money easily across borders, and their significant volatility, a coin worth £500 could be worth well above that just several hours after it's been donated[74], which raises questions about the manipulation of crypto currency for political agendas.

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[70] (Rose, Lock, & Nash, 2024)

[71] (UK Government, 2000) (Electoral Commission, 2023)

[72] (Power, 2025)

[73] (Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2022) (House of Commons, 2023) (Fraser, 2024)

[74] (Fundraising Reguator, 2025)

Safeguards

Independence of the Electoral Commission

The independence of the Electoral Commission is essential. Established by the *Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000*, it was conceived to be independent of the government and accountable to the politically neutral Speaker's committee[75]. However, the Johnson government, in the *Elections Act 2022*[76], legislated for greater government interference by allowing it to draw up a strategy and policy statement for the Electoral Commission, which meant it could guide the commission's work.

Only UK individuals and institutions can fund political parties or campaigns, with careful monitoring of loopholes.

The Electoral Commission has suggested passing legislation to require companies to use only money generated in the UK in donations to parties or the campaign, which The Atlantic Council, Transparency International, and the Electoral Reform Society have supported[77]. This could be reinforced with the introduction of more serious penalties for breaches, which has been widely supported[78].

Total contribution limits and limits per year

There is no limit on the maximum contribution or donation to a party or campaign. There are limits to campaign funds spent during a campaign: £54,010 multiplied by the number of seats contested for the national party. This system has been critiqued for its obfuscation between local and national spending, and the ability to funnel national funds into a small number of target constituencies[79]. Spending is only regulated during the pre-election "regulated" period; parties are free to spend however much they want before this period.

Therefore, having a cap on such donations is not unreasonable, nor unique: according to International IDEA, nearly 49% of countries have a donation cap on candidates (38% on political parties). Many countries subsidise the loss of donations after a cap is introduced with public funding, which the UK already has a system for, with Short and Cranborne money funding opposition parties' parliamentary work.

Introduction of more serious penalties

The Electoral Commission can only fine up to £20,000, a limit which they, amongst many others, have feared is becoming a part of the *"cost of doing business"*[80]. The Commission has recommended increasing its fining capabilities, citing the current

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[75] (UK Government, 2000)
[76] (UK Government, 2022)
[77] (Electoral Reform Society, 2019)
[78] (House of Commons Digital, Culturem Media and Sport Committee, 2019) (Intelligence and Security Committee, 2020)
[79] (APPG on Electoral Campaigning Transparency, 2020)
[80] (Electoral Commission, 2018)

fines' inability to be an effective deterrent. The Commission has argued that its fine should be in line with other regulators, but others have suggested the ability to levy unlimited fines as well as restoring the Commission's powers to bring criminal prosecutions (which were removed in the Elections Act 2022).

Part 2: Influence Voters

Vulnerabilities

Little regulation of the press

In the UK, there is no statutory regulation of the press, which is entirely self-regulated. Such regulation happens through the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) or IMPRESS; both have a code for print journalists to follow. However, these regulators are ineffective because the press is self-regulating: both are opt-in systems, with broadsheets such as The Guardian, Financial Times, and The Independent (and other papers) not participating[81].

The Office of Communications, better known as Ofcom, regulates broadcast media. It drafts and enforces a broadcasting code, which applies to all broadcast media[82].

Progressive media within the UK

There is a relative lack of left-wing print media within the UK; where the right-wing titles have a combined circulation of 2,100,000, the left-leaning titles only had a circulation of 300,000 (neutral titles have a circulation of 1,395,000)[83]. Online news websites are more neutral than partisan, with statistically more neutral sites having a larger reach than biased sites.

Monitoring and disrupting astroturfing pathways

Astroturfing is the practice of corporate or state-sponsored fake grassroots movements that claim to represent citizens' opinions but do not. They often rely on social media to drive engagement and give the appearance of coordination[84].

Astroturfing is challenging to uncover. Academic projects have been working on creating programmes that can detect them, such as the University of Oxford's Computational Propaganda Project or Ratkiewicz et al's Truthly project[85]. There is an effort to use linguistics to detect astroturfing[86].

Aside from criminalising astroturfing, which could be seen as restricting freedom of expression, there are options to disrupt astroturfing tactics. By uncovering them and

[81] (Woodhouse, How is the Press Regulated?, 2024)
[82] (Waitzman, 2024)
[83] (Ponsford, 2024)
[84] (Hartley, 2025)
[85] (Ratkiewicz, 2011)
[86] (Lits, 2020)

thus sharing their actual intentions, objectives, funding, and true origins, they may lose their ability to pretend to be a grassroots movement and hence influence. Another way would be to regulate it through corporate advertising law, allowing for restrictions and disruption of astroturfing tactics, done through forcing a declaration of use[87].

Misogyny as a gateway to far-right extremism.

Misogyny has been said to be not only a gateway but an early warning sign of extremism, especially violent extremism. It can lead to a want for control over fertility, such as limiting or forcing abortions, contraception or IVF treatments, or the forbidding of homosexuality, feminism or working outside the home – anything that does not fit with the man's worldview[88]. Domestic violence is also a result, with 50,000 women globally dying a year at the hands of family members. It impacts policing, whereby women's concerns are not handled properly due to male officers' perceptions of masculinity[89]. Transphobia can also be a result of sexism and misogyny, with a correlation in transphobic beliefs with those of authoritarianism, sexism, religious fundamentalism, morally dogmatic, ego-defensive and male-centric ideologies[90].

Traditional gender roles are central to many extreme ideologies, but the rise of the online so-called 'manosphere' has led to a new pipeline. Social media sites can anonymously connect those of similar ideologies, meaning there is a lesser chance of social repercussions. Malicious intent, with no legal ramifications, allows the flourishing of misogynistic, far-right echo chambers[91]. Sexism and misogyny have now become an expected part of social media, with nearly two-thirds of users experiencing such behaviours.

Bot-driven campaigning

'Bots' are automated internet software technology, and a term encompassing a wide range of technologies. Those that campaign, here as elsewhere, referred to as 'political bots,' often display certain characteristics which allow them to be easily identified[92]. These political bots have become prevalent across social media, with a 2025 study by Imperva estimating that 51% of all internet traffic was not human[93].

Political bots are an issue because they drown out the voices of real voters, often with malice and deceit. They have the capacity to manipulate the conversation, spreading political messaging that is frequently and deliberately divisive and hateful. Global Witness argues that bots are also frequently funded by foreign governments, which can

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[87] (Scott M. , 2019)
[88] (United Nations Development Programme; Oslo Governance Centre, p. 2)
[89] (United Nations Development Programme; Oslo Governance Centre)
[90] (Brough, 2022)
[91] (Weiss, Kobam , & Matthes, 2023)
[92] (Global Witness, 2024)
[93] (Imperva, 2025, p. 2)

put vast amounts of money into them, seeking to influence election results[94]. The rise of generative AI is likely to exacerbate the issue, making bots easier and cheaper to run[95].

Supportive social media algorithms

Social media algorithms govern what a user sees on their homepage. Generally, they work by showing people more content with which they have previously engaged. As such, they tend to be biased towards highly opinionated, inflammatory or sensationalised posts. This algorithm-driven system in the words of William Lucas[96], *"exacerbates existing prejudices, undermines trust in communities, and contributes to the marginalization of already vulnerable groups."* The platform owners can also tune the algorithms to privilege[97] certain users' or far-right (or other extremist) views. These algorithms are in large part what allows misinformation to run rampant over social media, a prevalent issue which two thirds of EU citizens report coming across at least weekly[98].

Safeguards

Strengthening Ofcom

The Online Safety Act 2023 allows Ofcom to regulate online spaces in a limited way. Expansion of these powers would allow for a broader range of protections. Stephanie Thelwall[99] has critiqued Ofcom's use of these powers, arguing they are not doing enough to protect women online; arguments that can be applied to nearly every demographic. Thelwall argues, *"It is in Ofcom's best interests to lay strong foundations on which the regulator can continue to build to reduce potential harms. Starting with weak foundations risks allowing service providers to establish ineffective or harmful processes and infrastructures that are difficult or impossible to undo."* As a part of further powers, Ofcom could be given limited regulation of the press, such as enforcing a duty to not recklessly publish incorrect information.

[94] (Global Witness, 2024)
[95] (Foos, 2024)
[96] (Lucas, 2024)
[97] (Schiffer, 2024)
[98] (Council of Europe, 2025)
[99] (Thelwall, 2025)

Appendix 4: Need for mitigation after an extremist government comes to power

Part 1: Legislation & Legislative Process

Threats and Vulnerabilities

House of Lords

The appointment process to the Lords is easily open to abuse. Firstly, the Prime Minister can theoretically reject those proposed by the leaders of other parties, leading to a dwindling opposition to the government in the Lords. Prime ministers (or, technically, the Monarch acting on the advice of the Prime Minister) can also appoint an unlimited number of their own peers – even against the advice of the HoLAC, for which there is substantial precedent[100]. This could happen in a similar way to Sir Lynton Crosby's 2022 proposal to create a significant number of new lords to allow easy passage for controversial legislation though the house[101].

Another way a government may seek to avoid serious scrutiny in the Lords is to exploit the Salisbury convention, which directs the Lords not to interfere with manifesto policies, exploiting the vague nature of what constitutes a manifesto policy and the Lords' general unwillingness to push such an issue[102]. A more constitutional bypass of the Lords could come though the *Parliament Acts* 1911 and 1949, which allow for the complete bypass of the house once certain time constraints have been met.

House of Commons

The government nearly always has a built-in majority in the lower house. This generates difficulty because the House of Commons (HoC) has little agenda-setting prerogative: instead, the government gets to choose how the vast majority of time is allotted[103]. HoC Standing Order 14 gives government business precedence over others on all sittings bar 13 Fridays. Standing order 27 further allows the government to arrange its business in any order which it sees fit. Further, the government has control over when parliament sits, having unilateral control over dissolution, only uncertain limits over prorogation, and only a mild check on adjournment[104]. This gives the government a tight grip over parliament, with MPs not having much of a check on this. To change this would just be to change the house's standing orders.

Safeguards

Limiting prime ministerial patronage

One way the Lords could be immunised from populism is by limiting prime ministerial patronage. For a moderate reform, short of creating an elected second chamber, we

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[100] (Council of Europe, 2025)
[101] (Thelwall, 2025)
[102] (Sparrow, 2020)
[103] (House of Commons, 2024)
[104] (Russell & Grover, 2021)

could see the prime minister relinquish the power of appointment. This could be in the form of a strengthened House of Lords Appointments Commission, like that seen in the Canadian Senate[105].

Similar restraints could also apply to limiting the number of seats in the house, creating a one-in-one-out system, which the house has recommended[106]. Similarly, the House of Lords Appointments Commission could be strengthened and given a total veto over appointments.

Part 2: Judiciary

Threats & Vulnerabilities

UK Supreme Court

One way the court's independence might be threatened is through stirring anti-court sentiment. While the appointment process is robust, it has been critiqued for having little democratic oversight – it is judges appointing judges. There have therefore been calls for changing the appointment process for more democratic oversight[107]. While there is a great deal of discomfort in having hearings of judges before or after appointment (for fear of US-style confirmation hearings), there were suggestions in a 2011 hearing from the judiciary of greater lay-person or parliamentary involvement. With the whipped-up fervour that can come from controversial rulings, mainly instigated by the press (such as *Enemies of the People*[108], the reaction to *Miller II*[109]), such sentiment could easily be manipulated to turn the court more political.

Curtail the right of legal challenge.

A government could seek to limit judicial review by adding further limitations on who can apply and continue their case, something which has happened several times already. Such limitations are nearly always political: when addressing the need for his changes, the then justice secretary Chris Grayling said that his judicial review reforms in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act were necessary to stop their use by left-wing activists to thwart government initiatives[110]. Human rights cases, which are different from judicial review in some important ways, could similarly be limited (such as by adding a nationality qualification)[111]. The government could also seek to limit public access to the judiciary is by limiting even further government funding for legal support. Raising court fees would have a similar effect.

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[105] (Brown, Canadian Senate Reform: What Has Been Happening?, 2020)
[106] (UK Parliament, 2025)
[107] (Delaney, 2016)
[108] (Slack, 2016)
[109] (Coleman, 2014)
[110] (Liberty, 2025)
[111] (Elliot, 2020)

It is within the power of parliament to declare certain items "non-justiciable." Similarly, codifying or 'clarifying' what can or cannot be judicially reviewed would have the same effect. To do so would be a key opportunity for a malevolent government to carve out certain powers for which they would not like the courts to interfere[112].

Safeguards

Clarifying constitutional positions and freedoms

Clarifying or codifying the common law around the royal prerogative may lead to greater judicial confidence in an area where that was not subject to judicial review before the 1970s, when courts could only rule on the existence and extent of the power[113].

Similarly, codifying some conventions would clarify the constitutional settlement and allow for greater justiciability and enforcement. These could include the dismissal of the prime minister, military involvement and the reserved powers of the sovereign, amongst others, allowing for legal enforcement in *ultra vires* cases.

Part 3: Government Overreach

Limiting the Right to Protest

The right to protest is currently protected under articles 10 and 11 of the ECHR, which protect freedom of expression, assembly, and association[114]. However, restrictions are continually implemented and enforced on this right, such as those in the *Public Order Act 1986*, *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022*[115] and the *Public Order Act 2023,* the latter of which introduced criminal offences relating to protest.

A malevolent government could seek to limit further specific protest actions, in line with the *Public Order Act* (POA). The POA caused concern amongst campaigners for fear of breaching human rights and impracticality[116]. The government could also further limit individuals' human rights and right to protest.

A second way people's right to protest might be limited is by restricting an individual from being allowed to protest, in line with the Serious Disruption Prevention Orders (SPDO) created in the *Public Order Act 2023*. Breaching an SDPO, while a civil order, is a criminal offence with a punishment of six months imprisonment or an unlimited fine. Each SDPO has its own punishment for breaking it[117]. Expanding the offences or definition[118] of "serious disruption" for which an SDPO can be issued, encouraging their use as a punishment or extending their maximum length are ways a malevolent

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[112] (Elliot, 2020)
[113] (Torrance, Royal Assent, 2025)
[114] (Human Rights Act 1998, 1998)
[115] (Good Law Project, 2025)
[116] (Liberty, 2024)
[117] (Downs, 2024)
[118] (MacFarlane, 2021)

government could seek to limit protest. Similarly, the government could encourage the use of private injunctions against protestors[119], or enforce the statutory power of the Home Secretary to block unwanted protestors[120].

Preventing Criticism and Attacking Dissent

If local government dissents, the government could seek to change their governance structures, through changing their elections[121], or push for the abolition of entire local government bodies. Local government could be attacked by cutting funding, removing powers, imposing new restrictions, and anything else the government can conceive of, all of which can be passed by an ordinary law. In this way, the government attacks dissent by rigging democracy in its favour.

Similarly, further voting restrictions could be implemented, such as the requirement to produce photo ID at the polling station, which was also introduced by the Elections Act 2022.

Claims of infringement of freedom of speech can be used by governments can use this to force their ideology into institutions, as with the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023.

The government also has the power to restrict and outright ban groups and supporting groups. They can do this through the terrorism act, which, by statutory instrument, the government can proscribe a group or a terrorist organisation, needing only a simple majority in each house to pass[122]. The government recently did this to Palestine Action, amongst others, in a very controversial move. The government could use this power to crush dissent.

Another way the government may seek to avoid dissent is through the power to amend the definition of extremism. This is entirely within the power of the government, and there are few checks and balances on it. The definition is used in public policy and directives, such as prevention. The UK government can therefore use it to attack dissenters by changing the definition, which it has sometimes been criticised for doing[123]. Hate speech laws, similarly, could encompass any group, so long as their speech can be specifically defined. Types of speech could also be included, such as criticism.

Executive ability to subvert existing structures.

Universities are often where dissent arises; therefore, malevolent governments usually seek to suppress them. The government holds a lot of control over universities through its grip on university finances: the government sets the student fees cap, as well as

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[119] (Downs, 2024)
[120] (Public Order Act 2023, 2023)
[121] (MacFarlane, 2021)
[122] (Terrorism Act 2000, 2000)
[123] (Conley, 2025) (MacFarlane, 2021)

giving universities a significant amount of other funding (around £1.439 million per university)[124]. The UK government also centrally sets the rates for international students, which are higher than those of domestic students, often subsidising the lower rates. With increasing financial struggles within the education sector, universities are already forced to move closer to the government to maintain dwindling grants and funds. It is conceivable that a malevolent government seeks to use this power to control universities.

The government also has immense control over the governance of universities. Nearly all universities are governed by a Royal Charter or legislation. With the Privy Council able to amend or withdraw these charters[125], and the parliament can amend and withdraw the legislation (Dalton, 2022), The government holds the governance of many universities in a chokehold.

The Office of Students has the power to revoke a university's degree awarding powers[126], and the ability of the university to use the protected term 'university.' While there are internal procedures for doing either of these[127], with enough pressure from the government, the degree-awarding powers may be withdrawn.

Civil Service

The British civil service was given a legislative basis in 2010, in the *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010*, which sought to codify the various orders on which it has been based since the Victorian era and remove the ministerial capability for total structural change[128]. Power and accountability within the service are no clearer.

The Civil Service Commission is responsible for ensuring competitive recruitment and promotion on merit. It could be tampered with – as Prime Minister, Johnson put Gisela Stuart into the role of First Civil Service Commissioner[129], which was controversial at the time.

It is challenging to place accountability within the service: the relationship between minister and servant is cryptic. Defined in the Ministerial Code as *"underpinned by their common duty of public duty"*[130]. The professional relationship between a department minister and their permanent secretary has been dictated by the Armstrong memorandum.

A government could seek to exploit these vague relationships to use the civil service as a scapegoat for its own poor decisions. If done tactically, the government could further seek to 'purge' the civil service of those who disagree with the government.

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[124] (Atherton, Lewis, & Bolton, 2024)
[125] (Privy Council Office, 2025)
[126] (Higher Education and Research Act 2017, 2017)
[127] (Office for Students, 2019)
[128] (Harris, 2013)
[129] (Cabinet Office, 2022)
[130] (Torrance, The Royal Perogative and Ministerial Advice, 2025)

Safeguards

Limits on prime ministerial patronage

Limiting prime ministerial patronage will provide a strong defence against undue influence. In some cases, such as the judiciary, having the Lord Chancellor's veto removed, or removing ministerial choice in appointing civil servants or bishops (instead using the existing structures of appointment), will strengthen those respective institutions. In others, codifying the conventions of non-interference (such as in the cases of university appointments, certain mayoralties (such as the Lord Mayor of London, and the approbation of the House of Commons speaker) should be done by law. Further, an independent commission should be created to recommend appointments for which there should be no political interference, such as those to arms-length bodies. This could be operated and allied with the commissioner for public appointments, who currently oversees these appointments' fair process, which should be set out in legislation[131].

There has historically been a suggestion of removing the power of patronage (along with much of the royal prerogative) in its entirety from the prime minister and other ministers, instead giving the speaker of the House of Commons the power to advise the monarch on appointments, subject to the House's approval[132].

Constitutional Prometheanism

Constitutional Prometheanism is the idea like that of checks and balances: ensuring that power cannot become over-centralised and that no singular centre of power can dominate the others. Constitutional Prometheanism goes further, placing an obligation on governmental and other bodies to defend each other using their powers. Groups which could help to safeguard democracy against a bad actor in power might include: the Judiciary, the fourth estate, the Police, the Armed Forces, the Secret Services, the Senior Civil Service and Academia. For example, we might see the press seek to defend universities against unwarranted governmental pressure.

In the UK, we might expect to see interference from the monarch – perhaps on the advice of one or two of the heads of the respective branches of government (the prime minister, the Speaker of the House of Commons, the Lord Speaker, and the Lady Chief Justice) or of a Promethean Committee. Given the King's importance within the constitution, he is one of the few people who could unilaterally halt a slip into authoritarianism. We might also expect to see resistance from the devolved and local governments, with them protecting each other and resisting an authoritarian central government. The implications of this royal intervention would be unprecedented in modern times and would certainly lead to a constitutional crisis.

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[131] (The Commissioner for Public Appointments, 2025)
[132] (Torrance, The Royal Perogative and Ministerial Advice, 2025)

To encourage action, legal obligations could be placed upon the required bodies in certain conditions – eg an automatic vote of confidence in certain circumstances in the Commons (such as in France)[133], or an automatic judicial review of certain practices. Similarly, self-interest could be a major motivator, with the reduction of funds or powers to compel the body to intercede.

Constitutional Duties

While there are responsibilities or actions required of the executive, set out in law, there is little to set out their 'duties,' except precedent. The Lord Chancellor, by law, has a duty set out in their oath of office to *"defend the independence of the judiciary"*[134]. New ministers could take a similar, ideally legally binding, oath on assuming office. This would set out the person's expectations, duties and requirements while carrying out their office. These duties could also be set out in law, with a vote of no confidence or impeachment possible if they are maliciously or incompetently broken.

Part 4: 'Elective Dictatorship' and entrenchment in the UK constitution

Threats and Vulnerabilities

Elective Dictatorship

'Elective Dictatorship' is a term coined by Lord Hailsham, expressing his concern over the growing executive power. He claimed that executive balance had grown to a point where it outbalanced that of parliament; it could now bring about fundamental changes at will, fearing no defeat. All it needed was to maintain enough popularity to win the next election[135]. This is enforced by two factors: the sovereignty of parliament and the government's control of the parliamentary agenda. However, it is not just the control of parliament that means the executive has been critiqued as a dictatorship, but also the attitude. Under the 'good chaps' theory of government, each branch of government is supposed to have self-restraint when exercising its power, knowing the unwritten rules and conventions of who should know what[136].

Some, like scholar Nat le Roux, put this at the feet of the growing doctrine of the personal mandate, shifting political norms[137]. They claim that since the 1980s, politicians have seen themselves as outsiders rather than part of the governing elite, so their democratic mandate empowers them. Leaders, therefore, are empowered to change the constitution or other fundamental structures, overruling other sources of authority. The interpretation le Roux presents can easily be seen as a corollary to that of populism:

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[133] (Government of France, 1958)
[134] (HM Government, 2005)
[135] (Watts, 2007)
[136] (Blick & Hennessy, Good Chaps No More?, 2019)
[137] (le Roux, 2014)

"Taken to its logical extreme, the end point of this doctrine is an impoverished political ecology in which the only actor is an omni-competent centralised executive, constrained only by periodic popular election."

Parliamentary Sovereignty

Parliamentary sovereignty can be best explained as parliament's ability to: 1) make laws about anything, or unmake laws about anything[138]; 2) create laws that, when valid (i.e. not created when parliament is inhibited), cannot be questioned or overturned in court or by any other body; parliament is the supreme lawmaker; 3) not be bound by a past parliament.

Here, parliament is seen as the assembly of the Sovereign, the House of Lords and the House of Commons, known as the King-in-Parliament. Acts of Parliament can be passed without the consent of the full King-in-Parliament. The House of Lords can be bypassed by the Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949[139]. There is also precedent for the King to be circumvented, even outside of the civil wars[140]. The need for this, however, is doubtful due to the disuse of the royal veto (it has not been used since Queen Anne in 1708, and even then, it was on the advice of ministers). This effectively leaves the House of Commons as supreme in its legislative power.

Safeguards

Constitutional Acts and Legal Entrenchment

There has been a growing acknowledgement within the judiciary of 'constitutional acts;' though there is uncertainty on how certain acts have reached this status[141]. While ordinary acts of parliament, these acts cannot be 'implicitly repealed' (that is, partially repealed indirectly by a future act of parliament). Instead, courts require explicit wording of repeal in order to consider the constitutional act repealed.

Legal entrenchment occurs when an act requires all other acts to be read by the courts in a way compatible with each other. This system is currently in use by the *Human Rights Act 1998*, which requires all laws, as far as possible, to be read as compatible with the Act[142].

This treatment is weak: it only protects against implied repeal, leaving an act defenceless against explicit repeal. However, if certain acts are designed as *"constitutional"* by an act of parliament, and given protections, it could lead to in-part entrenchment without requiring a full written constitution or undermining parliamentary sovereignty.

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[138] (Dicey, 1982)
[139] (Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949, 1949)
[140] (Torrance, Royal Assent, 2025)
[141] (Young, 2022)
[142] (Human Rights Act 1998, 1998)

Political Entrenchment

Political entrenchment primarily comes in the form of the manner and forms of entrenchment. These are found in UK law, with devolved bodies being protected by referendums[143], and the now-repealed *Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011*[144], requiring a two-thirds majority to call an early election.

There are therefore many ways in which these could be implemented to protect the above 'constitutional acts': there could be a required super-majority to pass laws amending them[145], or a mandatory plebiscite. There could also be the mandatory approval of the upper house, giving the Lords a veto over acts amending constitutional acts[146].

However, due to the sovereignty of parliament, such entrenchments are limited. Parliament could pass an act subverting the manner and form requirements (like the *Early General Election Act 2019*, which subverted the requirements set out in the *Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011*). As such, any manner and form requirements must be doubly entrenched, and even then, they would be at risk from improper exercise of parliamentary sovereignty[147].

The Human Rights Act 1998 also established incompatibility statements, which the court can issue if it deems an act incompatible with the convention rights[148]. These incompatibility statements could be extended to all forms of constitutional acts, with the courts being given greater liberty to defend those acts. While this does not require that the government or parliament act on the statements, it does create political pressure for them to do so.

Having some manner and form entrenchments and incompatibility statements does lead to a greater form of entrenchment, even if they can be subverted, as it creates political and conventional pressure not to amend the acts[149]. Seeking to subvert these measures may lead to reluctance from MPs to vote for these measures, but also pushback from the public and press, which may otherwise not be forthcoming.

Redefining Parliament

It is a matter of intense debate whether parliament has the power to define and redefine itself. Dicey maintains that this is too close to a parliament binding its future self; Jennings argues that it does, otherwise it cannot be said to have total legislative competency and authority[150], which has been the view adopted by the courts in cases

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[143] (Scotland Act 1998, 1998)
[144] (Fixed Term Parliaments Act 2011, 2011)
[145] (Blick, Entrenchment in the United Kingdom: A Written Constitution by Default?, 2017)
[146] (Blick, Constitutional Implications of the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act 2011, 2016)
[147] (Young, 2022)
[148] (Human Rights Act 1998, 1998)
[149] (Young, 2022)
[150] (Bradley, 2011)

relating to the Parliament Acts[151]. Therefore, if parliament were to redefine itself to account for the manner and form requirements, there is a precedent for it to be upheld in the courts. Whether this is implemented could only be decided at the time.

However, parliament could redefine itself in a way that meant a court's *ex post* enforcement would not be necessary. Parliament could establish within itself a body which looks at whether the bill being passed affects the constitutional acts or is being passed inappropriately. This stage could happen after the bill has been passed by parliament, but before royal assent is given, operating similarly to the French constitutional council[152]. This *ex-ante* review would therefore not contravene the sovereignty of the king-in-parliament, as the final stage of royal assent has not yet been gained; this also makes the body difficult to subvert.

Appendix 5: Need for mitigation in relation to handing over power

Part 1: Suppression of Free Elections

Threats & Vulnerabilities

Voter restriction

Parliament can determine who can vote. Parliament has extended the franchise many times (at the time of writing, plans are underway for it to do so again). It is therefore possible for parliament to restrict the franchise. This would not necessarily have to be done by age, but by any demographic characteristic. One way this could be done more subtly and precisely is by expanding the number of disqualified voters. There are currently four ways in which someone can be disqualified: be a peer with a seat in the House of Lords; be an alien; be under 18; be in prison or a mental hospital; or be found guilty of corrupt or illegal practices at an election[153]. Expanding any of these would result in voter restriction.

An authoritarian government could press charges against those it does not wish to vote. If imprisoned, even for the week of the general election, they will not be able to vote. One could bypass the court system (instead only requiring the approval of a Justice of the Peace) by putting dissidents in mental hospitals before an election, with the police able to do so through a section 135 warrant[154]. Finding them guilty of a corrupt or illegal electoral practice would also open up options of disqualification, with the *Representation of the People Act 1983* allowing for a 5-year disqualification from voting or holding elected office for up to five years[155]. The *Elections Act 2022* also compels

[151] (Jackson vs Attorney General, 2006)
[152] (Conseil Constitutionnel, 2025)
[153] (Natzler, 2019)
[154] (Mental Health Act 1983, 1983)
[155] (Representation of the People Act 1983, 1983)

judges to give disqualification orders, revoking voting rights, as a penalty for certain offences, such as intimidation[156].

The vote could be restricted in any way, as proven by the rollout of needing a photographic ID to vote. The list of IDs could be restricted, aptitude tests introduced, requirements about work or finance, or any other means which suit the government best. Other methods, such as making it more difficult to register to vote, or making it so you have to re-register more frequently, or reducing the number of polling places or the number of staff there, or many other practised forms of voter suppression, could be slipped into UK electoral law. Many of these restrictions are distinctly classist – something with precedent in the UK as the franchise was often drawn along class lines. Such laws are becoming more frequent across the democratic world: in implementing further voter suppression, the UK would be following the trend, not bucking it[157].

Trust in the electoral system is high in the UK – polling during the election day of the 2024 general election, with 84% of voters saying the process was secure, and 90% expressing satisfaction with the process[158]. Much of the voter suppression movements have been in part caused by fearmongering about the security of elections: in the UK, this was over claims of electoral fraud[159], but similar measures in the USA have been passed over fears of electoral theft, primarily spread by Trump's 2021 campaign to 'stop the steal'. Further fearmongering in the UK could allow for further and wider-reaching suppression.

Repression of Opposition

Repression of the opposition is a core part of reducing the opposition's power and its electoral chances. Before an election, the government may seek to set up a system whereby the opposition faces endless paperwork and administrative work, limiting their access to resources. This creates a situation where the opposition is legally disqualified on technical grounds[160]. This could be done in the UK though the weaponisation of the Electoral Commission.

Restricting Short or Cranborne money, that is, the public funding given to opposition parties, would also be a way to suppress opposition parties in their work. Parliamentary offices of opposition parties would no longer be able to function to the same extent, and as such scrutiny and focused opposition would stall or become more reliant on private donations.

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[156] (UK Government, p. §30)
[157] (Townley, 2022)
[158] (Electoral Commission, 2024)
[159] (House of Commons; Hansard, 2021)
[160] (Mikola & Santos, 2025)

Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering, to the degree that it exists in the US[161], does not exist in the UK due to the independent boundary commissions that seek to limit the extent of gerrymandering[162]. There is, however, room for some political interference.

Firstly, Parliament can implement its own boundaries over the top of the boundary commissions, as it did before the commission's creation in 1944.

Appointments to the commission could create further abuse. Appointments tend to be of senior judges[163], which while conventionally are not political, are made by the Secretary of State – opening an avenue to abuse.

A key part of this rule manipulation might be to increase the number of 'protected constituencies,' which must exist, even if they do not meet the other criteria. Creating protected safe seats for a party, which the boundary commissions cannot change, would be the utmost form of gerrymandering in the UK. Similarly, university constituencies, which existed in the three hundred years prior to 1950, could be re-introduced[164]. This would allow graduates two votes. Such a seat could work on a separate voting system, as the university constituencies did for the last 30 years of their existence.

Control of the Electoral Commission

In the UK, there are numerous offences relating to the conduct of elections – 13 in total[165]. The Electoral Commission is charged with the civil enforcement of these laws; however, criminal enforcement is done by the Crown Prosecution Service. Therefore, its independence, or control, would be critical to a hostile government.

In authoritarian regimes, it is common to see these public bodies being used to suppress opposition. The bodies are drawn under the executive's wing, unable to act independently, and coerced to prosecute opposition parties while overlooking the authoritarian party. In this way, opposition can be crushed, not overtly, but in a lawful and bureaucratic manner. Such tactics have been used in Turkey, which has used the state auditing agency to suppress opposition[166].

Part 2: Foul Electoral Tactics

Threats & Vulnerabilities

[161] (Watts, 2007)
[162] (Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020, 2020)
[163] (Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020, 2020)
[164] (Ratcliffe, 2015)
[165] (Electoral Commission, 2024)
[166] (Soyaltin, 2023)

Creating Apathy

The government could seek to create voter apathy, creating an atmosphere that discourages voting. One way in which this could be done is by fostering a sense of a broad group setting, encouraging senses of the diffusion of responsibility (where one's sense of responsibility is diluted when around others); pluralistic ignorance (creating a sense of 'someone else will do something soon', by encouraging the tendency of assuming and relying on the actions of others), and evaluation assumption (fear of being judged for acting)[167]. In creating such an environment, where someone feels that they do not have the responsibility to act, feels that someone else will act on their behalf, and that even if they did act, they would be judged, a hostile government could foster voter apathy. Furthermore, recent psychological evidence by David Kahneman suggests that emotion plays a significant part in how one votes[168]. There is also further evidence to suggest that most voters do not decide how to vote until election day, indicating a high presence of both apathy and emotive voting[169]. It can therefore be inferred that creating a highly emotive election, along with well-placed emotive markers (for example, putting polling stations in schools in an education-focused election), could have a significant effect. While not every voter could be dissuaded or influenced by such tactics, it could significantly impact turnout and decisions.

Voter Manipulation

While electoral bribery is illegal in the UK[170], implicit bribery would be possible – especially if the Electoral Commission had lost its independence. A politician could give money to a local group, who are then allowed to distribute it as they please, or indirectly bribe in many other ways, like patronage[171]. Not all voters need to be bribed, just those in key areas. Of course, it is not as simple as distributing money on election day; such methods can be disastrously ineffective[172].

The reverse side of the coin is intimidation, known in law as undue influence, where you threaten harm to a person to cause them to vote a particular way, or not to vote at all[173]. Such intimidation is common within an authoritarian, or growing authoritarian, regime[174]; it would be tempting for a government struggling to stay in power to use it.

A hostile government seeking to maintain its power may also seek to affect the electoral register. In Britain, electoral registers are held locally by councils[175]. There are a multitude of ways that an electoral register could be tampered with. It could be made so that it is far more challenging to register by requiring re-registration frequently, removing

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[167] (Wheeler, 2025)
[168] (British Psychological Society, n.d.)
[169] (Kahneman, 2012)
[170] (British Psychological Society, n.d.)
[171] (Representation of the People Act 1983, 1983)
[172] (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2019)
[173] (Representation of the People Act 1983, 1983)
[174] (Mohamed, 2024)
[175] (Johnston, 2025)

anonymous registration, or making registration voluntary. It could also come about that electoral registers start to be purged, a practice in America where voters are discriminatorily removed from the electoral roll to 'clean them up' [176] . A government could seek to exert influence over the electoral register by centralising it, potentially taking it out of local council hands and moving it into its own, or more likely, a corrupted Electoral Commission's hands, or moving it online (allowing tampering without a paper trail). Removing registered voters of a different political persuasion would mean they would merely be turned away when they arrive at the polling station, with no possibility of re-registering until the end of the election[177].

Manipulating the Count

Similarly, we may move away from paper voting towards electronic voting. Electronic voting has been trialled in the UK since at least 2002. However, significant issues remain with electronic voting[178]. A move towards electronic voting would allow for better government manipulation of voting and vote tallies, allowing a single user to affect counts nationwide. Similarly, removing anonymity would allow for greater bribery and intimidation. With electoral voting, we could see individual voters' votes systematically removed or changed across constituencies, to such a precise level that it may be undetectable.

Ballot-box stuffing

The obverse of the more subtle and deceptive tactics used above, ballot box stuffing is a high-risk, high-reward tactic, often used when all other measures have failed[179]. If successful and undetected, it can allow for the smooth continuation of power; if it fails or is detected, it can lead to national embarrassment, domestic conflict, or not adding enough ballots to succeed. It is for this reason that it is seen as a last-resort measure.

Part 3: Refusal to hand over power

Threats and Vulnerabilities

Avoiding Elections

There are numerous ways a government could seek to avoid elections. All it requires is a change in the law – an act which has been done in the past, such as during the Second World War. Notably, such a law, to delay a general election, is one of the few bills the House of Lords can veto outright[180]. As in previous cases, a war could be declared or joined, with the implication that due to wartime effort (such as troops being abroad, or it

[176] (Brennan Center for Justice, 2025)
[177] (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2019)
[178] (Scott T. , 2019)
[179] (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2019)
[180] (Parliament Acts 1911 and 1949, 1949)

being too dangerous to get people to vote, or registering electors too difficult, all explanations used during WW2[181]) a general election would be impracticable.

However, there are more coercive ways to delay elections. An emergency, whether factual or fabricated, could be declared, and with it, emergency powers could be used. If a new act was used to bring in such powers, then a clause could delay a general election. While martial law has been explicitly banned in the UK since 1628[182], some emergency powers have seeped towards martial law, leading to a possibility of martial-like law[183].

Refusal to Resign

We are unlikely to see an attack on parliament like that seen in the US on January 6, 2021[184]. Primarily, there is no 'confirmation' process done to parliamentary constituencies – by the time parliament meets, MPs are usually sure in their seats, and a new government (if elected) is appointed. This removes a key rallying point for protestors. Equally, while there are often protests after an election, such as those held after Boris Johnson's 2019 electoral victory, they are often inconsequential[185]. This is not to say no such riot could happen. Such fervour could be whipped up at the time of the new parliament's opening, which would cause significant disruption and violence. The UK is just as vulnerable to such a riot as the US was in 2021 – but such a riot would be on significantly different rhetorical lines.

A prime minister, at no point, has to resign. It is by mere convention, forged with the first English prime ministers, that they should resign, or hold an early election, if they lose a vote of no confidence in the House of Commons[186]. It is not unusual, however, for prime ministers who have lost their majority to test the waters after a general election, to see if they can maintain the confidence of the house.

Constitutionally, only the King can force the prime minister from their position, though this has not been done in the UK since 1934. Whether this happens, however, is unknowable. There is a strong convention that the sovereign should not be drawn into party politics, which could be used by the prime minister to maintain power. Whatever happens, the UK would languish in a constitutional crisis on a scale not seen in modern politics. And if conventions stand, there is no defence[187].

Safeguards

Codifying and putting into law conventions surrounding no-confidence votes (which were once law but have since been removed) would have a significant and immediate

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[181] (House of Commons, 1942)
[182] (Petition of Right, 1628, 1628)
[183] (Skeffington, 2022)
[184] (BBC News, 2023)
[185] (BBC News, 2019)
[186] (Hennessy & Blick, Could it Happen Here?, 2025, p. 5f)
[187] (Hennessy & Blick, Could it Happen Here?, 2025)

impact without being too controversial and would provide a lawful way for a government to be removed without relying on the monarch.

Appendix 5: Three Lines of Constitutional Defence

What is the 'Three Lines of Defence' model?

The Three Lines of Defence model is a risk management framework applied within banks to identify and manage risks effectively. It ensures that more than one function within a bank has responsibility for risk oversight, while ensuring the relative responsibilities are clear.

The three lines are as follows:

- *First Line of Defence:* consists of the operational management and staff who directly own and manage the risks associated with their day-to-day activities - for example, customer due diligence when onboarding new customers/periodically reviewing customer risk profiles. Operational management are responsible for designing, implementing, and operating controls (including control metrics) to mitigate risks. They are responsible for regularly reviewing the effectiveness of their controls (e.g. in the case of due diligence, managing any backlog in conducting periodic reviews);
- *Second Line of Defence*: comprises the risk management and compliance functions within the bank. Their role includes setting policies, defining risk tolerances, providing guidance to the first line, and monitoring the effectiveness of risk management and control processes. The second line may conduct assurance reviews of control processes - for example, reviews of customer due diligence processes where the second line may have concerns. The compliance and risk functions will typically report to the CEO;
- *Third Line of Defence*: consists of the Internal Audit function, which provides independent assurance regarding the effectiveness of the first and second lines of defence. Internal Audit issues reports to the board and/or audit committee, ensuring independent oversight of risk management and control processes. The annual audit plan will be set by the head of Internal Audit in conjunction with the board, having regard to consideration of the greatest risks facing the bank at any given time. A failed audit will typically have significant consequences for management within both the first- and second-line functions.

The Three Lines of Defence model guards against complacency and keeps management at all levels and in all functions on their toes. Failed assurance reviews and/or failed audits will result in increased costs (in remediation), diversion of management resources to fix the issues intense senior management attention, and negative consequences for bonuses and career progression.

In security settings, the Three Lines of Defence model is well established. National regulators (eg the Financial Conduct Authority) assess the effectiveness overall of a bank's three lines of defence model.

Why apply this approach to Constitutional Defence?

Without such a model, we risk a one-off exercise to implement measures to protect the constitution that could suffer from one or more of the following issues:

- the measures/controls look good on paper but when applied in practice are ineffective (e.g. easy to circumvent, or too hard to monitor their effectiveness)
- In time, the measures/controls become less relevant as the underlying risks change
- Monitoring is ineffective
- The consequences of any control breach are mild and thus insufficient deterrent
- Complacency creeps in - 'problem solved' - only to get a nasty shock later.

What potential issues and constraints might there be in applying this approach?

Within a bank, it is easy to define clearly the separation of duties and responsibilities. For example, the head of retail banking is responsible for managing customer due diligence, while the head of compliance is responsible for defining policies around customer due diligence and assuring the policies are applied appropriately. Both report to the CEO who has ultimate accountability. The head of Internal Audit reports to the Board and is free therefore to report impartially about failings across the organisation. The Board can make CEO hiring - and firing - decisions.

Within government this is much harder. So much power rests with the Prime Minister: parliamentary committees do not have the same powers as a corporate board, for example (they cannot sack the PM). There is no equivalent of national regulators that have the power to restrict business or levy fines if control processes are not working as they should. Ultimately, what is the sanction that can be applied to an authoritarian prime minister (with a supine parliamentary majority) who seeks to over-ride the constitution?

Leaders of second- and third-line functions should be appointed for fixed terms, so that a prime minister cannot simply replace them. Their funding would need to be similarly protected.

Going further, legislation might be passed to require all future constitutional changes to be put to Parliament vote and achieve a two-thirds majority in favour.

Going further still, the constitution might be amended to create a body that sits outside of Parliament, and which has the power *in extremis* to call for the replacement of a prime minister (how exercised would need to be determined). Or the Supreme Court might be awarded powers to issue a 'Red Card.' Such powers would of course be highly controversial as they would mean an end to absolute parliamentary sovereignty.

How might this approach be applied?

In principle, the approach could be applied as follows (the below assumes that the two-thirds hurdle for constitutional change is put in place):

First Line: Operational Management

Unless they commit to clearing the higher voting bar for amending, introducing or repealing constitutional legislation, political parties would be required to refrain from advocating policies that are in breach of laws recognised as being constitutional (such as the Human Rights Act) and could not include these policies in their manifestos.

Unless Ministers are committed to clearing the higher voting threshold, civil servants, Parliamentary Counsel and Ministers do not draft and bring forward legislation which is unconstitutional or seek to amend legislation of a constitutional nature.

Particular attention should be paid to legislative changes that affect institutions which are key to maintaining constitutional safeguards such as the Electoral Commission and the judiciary. Ministers would be responsible for ensuring new legislative proposals comply with constitutional law and policies. Those policies would require a constitutional impact assessment to be performed when drafting new legislation.

Second Line: Oversight and Compliance

MPs, Parliament, the Independent Advisor on Ministerial Standards (should a Minister erroneously claim a legislative change is not constitutional in nature), Select Committees, the Fourth estate, Civil Society (eg Fact Checkers) proactively challenge the government should it seek to bring forward legislation which is unconstitutional in nature or seek to amend or repeal constitutional legislation when it has not committed to the higher voting bar.

Further, independent bodies such as the Electoral Commission and the House of Lords Constitution Committee would monitor adherence to constitutional law and policies.

Third Line: Independent Assurance

Third line assurance could be provided by the Supreme Court reviewing legislation it considers to be unconstitutional.

If it rules the government is acting unconstitutionally, its judgement would be a Yellow Card, requiring remedial action.

If it rules the government is acting unconstitutionally and the government has proven unwilling to take remedial action (and it has been granted new powers to block unconstitutional legislation) its judgement would be a Red Card.

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Appendix 7: Contributors

This report was written by Andrew Blick, Paul Bradford, Tom Brake, Harley Harrison, Mark Kieran, and Mark E Thomas (lead author), with valuable contributions by others.

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