

DEMOCRACY ON THE BRINK



**Immediate Action to Safeguard UK
Democracy**

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 paper 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 parliamentary term is the opportunity to act; there may not be another opportunity.

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Summary

Reading the Project 2025 document showed, 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 recognises the potential for *bad actors* to seek and obtain power, and take steps to prevent that;
- **The scale of the threat is unacceptable.** In risk management circles, risk is defined by the simple 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 35%±10%. **Without action, we are playing Russian roulette** with British democracy and with our social contract – but with two loaded chambers;
- **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 outlined a practical series of actions that the government could take now to enable these mitigation actions to happen.

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.

Read the full *Defensive Constitutional Reform* report: <https://tinyurl.com/DCRFull5>

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The Problem

The United Kingdom's constitution comprises the body of laws, conventions, and principles through which government, Parliament, and the courts exercise authority. It also provides the framework through which the rule of law is applied to those governing.

Unlike many other states, the UK does not possess a single, codified constitutional document. Instead, its constitution rests on a combination of statutes, common law, and unwritten conventions, relying on the good faith and restraint of the nation's political leaders: the 'good chaps theory of politics.'

This creates two major vulnerabilities:

- It's too easy to change: As Parliament is sovereign, any government with a majority can pass a new law that alters fundamental constitutional rules.
- It's hard to enforce: The 'good chaps' convention presumes political actors will adhere to established norms; yet when they do not, there exist few mechanisms to compel compliance.

Consequently, an incoming government in the UK exercises extensive control over the constitutional framework – significantly more so than a US president – and could use this authority to reshape the constitutional settlement in ways that primarily advance its own interests.

A Cautionary Tale: The Case of the US

The United States has often been held up as the model of a strong, codified constitution. But the experience of the Trump presidency and administration provides a critical warning: even a formal constitution is not an effective defence against a bad actor taking power and aggressively dismantling or ignoring checks and balances.

The Trump administration has:

- **Attacked the Rule of Law:** Repeatedly attacked the independence of judges and lawyers, ignored court orders, and encouraged law enforcement agencies like ICE to operate without due process.
- **Targeted Independent Checks:** Consistently attacked critical media outlets as “enemies of the people,” demanded the dismissal of journalists who criticised it, undermined the scientific rigour and academic freedom of independent institutions, and spread harmful misinformation without facing accountability.
- **Used State Power Against Opponents:** Openly threatened political enemies, blurring the line between the apparatus of government and the personal interests of the leader.

The warnings should have been clear from Trump's first term: the findings of the Mueller report that Russia was attempting to influence US politics, Trump's stacking of the Supreme Court, and his attempted insurrection should have been ample indication that defensive action was needed.

But the Biden administration took no significant defensive action.

The warnings we have seen in the UK

The threats to our democracy and to the UK's social contract are visibly escalating. For example, Reform UK is developing its own US-style plans which we refer to in this summary as 'Project 2029'¹. Press reports highlight numerous risks to our democracy:

- **Reform plans to introduce extremist policies and tactics** without the explicit consent of voters, including:
 - Implementing draconian policies toward migrants;
 - Repealing equalities and human rights legislation such as the Human Rights Act and membership of the ECHR, and removing rights to free healthcare and other public services and benefits;
 - Weakening democratic safeguards like the right to peaceful protest;
 - Sidestepping Parliament where possible and directly appointing judges and bishops.
- **There is increasing influence of Wealth and Technology in our Politics:** Tech billionaires and disinformation networks are already exerting disproportionate influence on UK politics:
 - There is evidence that online Psychological Operations techniques were deployed during Brexit and warnings of online psychological operations techniques manipulating future elections;
 - Disinformation techniques, amplified by increasingly sophisticated AI, are spreading faster and more effectively than ever.
- **There is widespread foreign money and influence** on our political parties:
 - Former Russian oligarchs have donated to the Conservative party and Conservative parliamentarians;
 - Chinese interests have also donated to a Labour parliamentarian;
 - There are no effective limits on what a foreign donor can donate to a UK political party. In 2024, Elon Musk offered \$100m (around £78 million) – and the support of his social media platforms – to Reform UK, although he has not yet made such a donation, and has incited Tommy Robinson and others to overthrow the current government and have new elections.

The likelihood of a government strongly influenced by these external interests coming to power grows daily. As the public grows frustrated with the *status quo*, the two-party system has broken down, party allegiances have fractured and the multiplicity of parties means outside organisations carry more weight and wield more influence.

A US-style Political Action Committee (PAC), GBPAC, has been set up under the Chairmanship of Ben Habib, the leader of Advance UK, with the aim of uniting and supporting the far-right in British politics. Little is known about its funding sources.

¹ Not to be confused with the Democrats' Project 2029 in the States, which sets out a plan to rebuild America, should they come to power in 2029

A new think tank, named Centre for a Better Britain, has been set up to support Reform UK and develop its Project 2029 (P2029). Some information is available about its donors, but there is no comprehensive picture of who they are.

Some UK parties, eg Reform, are seeking money from wealthy people in tax havens, and the Homeland Party and Reform UK have said they will accept cryptocurrency donations, the original sources of which are hard to establish.

The new head of MI6, Blaise Metreweli, has warned that we are now in a space 'between peace and war,' and specifically mentioned threats to UK democracy from hostile foreign states and technology giants.

Where these warning signs may lead

The US's project 2025 provides a template for what could come next in the dismantling of UK democracy and undermining of key UK institutions:

- **Power Concentration**
 - Executive unchecked.
 - Parliament reduced to a rubber stamp.
 - The judiciary framed as "enemies of the people."
 - Elections held less frequently and less free and fair.
- **Political Manipulation**
 - Foreign funding and external influence grow.
 - Gerrymandering of seats and attacks on opposition parties become widespread.
 - Electoral outcomes routinely denied.
- **Undermining Institutions**
 - Media, charities, and universities critical of government policy defunded and attacked.
 - Academic freedom and independent oversight constrained.
 - Political friends appointed to key roles in institutions.
- **Weakening of Public Services without explicit public consent**
 - NHS privatisation or insurance-based model for healthcare imposed.
 - Vital public services talked down and deliberately underfunded.
- **Attacks on Civil Liberties**
 - Crackdowns on protests and dissent intensify.
 - Suppression of opposition voices ramps up.
 - Radicalised and extreme narratives become mainstream.
 - People arrested and deported without due process.

If the 'good chaps theory' cannot be applied to the situation we face, what can? A discipline which is specifically designed to protect complex and valuable systems against bad actors is Information Systems Security. We have borrowed our approach from that discipline.

The first step is to conduct a risk analysis.

Risk Analysis

“It is better to be roughly right than precisely wrong” - Keynes

In this context, risk is defined by the equation: $Risk = Impact \times Probability$.

We analysed variants of the following scenario, which we call the ‘multibillionaire-driven scenario’ on the UK population:

- 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, or be used for, 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 choose to vote for a far-right leader who aligns politically with Trump and Putin without full knowledge of the plan he intended to implement because it was kept under wraps (as the US population was persuaded to vote for Trump without fully appreciating the impact of Project 2025 – indeed even in July 2025, many Americans had little idea what the President planned to do because he hadn't been open about his intentions);
- 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, getting rid of all human rights and equality legislation, slashing taxes and benefits, and abandoning efforts to check climate change, etc;
- Finally he or she could consolidate power by using ‘concerns’ about (almost non-existent) voter fraud 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 – being the chosen vehicle.

Our assessment of **Impact**, based on the considerations above and the example of the US, 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.

Because we are in uncharted territory so that historical relative frequencies give little insight into the probabilities we face, and because the later events in the scenario depend on whether or not the earlier events have taken place, we used Bayesian probability to assess the chances of the scenario materialising.

Our assessment of **probability** shows that:

- The probability that a far-right leader is elected at the next election is of the order of $45\% \pm 10\%$
- The probability that a plan like project 2025 is implemented after the election is of the order of $35\% \pm 10\%$
- The probability that the General Election after next is effectively rigged in favour of a governing far-right party is of the order of $30\% \pm 10\%$.

While these estimates are not precise, they are surprisingly insensitive to changes in the underlying assumptions (which are set out in detail in the main report). We believe that they are roughly right.

This implies that, if we take no action, we are playing Russian roulette with UK democracy – but with two loaded chambers.

Having assessed the risk as unacceptable, the second step is to identify potential actions to mitigate the risk.

Defending our Constitution

We need to defend our constitution both before and after the next election:

- Before the election to prevent the results being manipulated by hostile actors; and, in case this is not sufficient,
- After the election to make it harder for an incoming government simply to ignore our constitution and existing checks and balances and implement a Project 2029.

Potential actions effective before the election

The most obvious mitigations may be:

- Delivering what the British people need and want
- Tackling dark money in politics;
- Tackling misinformation and disinformation; and
- Tackling direct interference in elections.

Our assessment, detailed in the main report, is that while all these avenues should be pursued, sufficiently effective action to reduce the risk to a minimal level is unlikely.

This makes it important also to consider measures which could give some protection after a bad actor has seized power.

Potential actions effective after the election

With a governmental system such as the UK's, where the governing party meets minimal resistance, and has considerable control over the constitution, the scope for attacks on fundamental civic and human rights and the constitutional framework and institutions that defend those rights is frighteningly wide.

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 and entrenching these as far as possible;
- Safeguarding separation of powers; and
- Establishing Three Lines of Defence.

Clarify and Entrench Constitutional Duties, Rights and Freedoms

UK law does not clearly define ministers' responsibilities in statute; they derive primarily from constitutional conventions, the non-binding Ministerial Code which is determined by the Prime Minister of the day, and parliamentary practice. The British public's rights (like those set out in the Human Rights Act) are enshrined in law, but they are afforded no greater degree of protection than any other piece of legislation. This means Parliament could repeal the Human Rights Act as easily as any other law. In the British system, no part of the constitution is permanent or entrenched.

Potential solutions for government

Write a binding 'Job Description' for its work: draw up a list of the government's constitutional duties, such as protecting our system of rules, maintaining legal checks and balances, and serving the British people.

Enshrine Ministers' constitutional responsibilities in law. They can then be more easily held to account.

Create a list of Constitutional Laws: identify the laws which underpin UK democracy and citizens' rights. Secure the support of as many political parties as possible for these constitutional laws and a commitment that they will follow enhanced procedures when reviewing or introducing them (including pre-legislative scrutiny, consideration of relevant bills on the floor of the House etc).

Introduce a supermajority measure²: In this way the identified constitutional legislation could be at least partially entrenched.

Strengthen the separation of powers

In the UK, the Government and Parliament are fused because the Prime Minister and the rest of the government are also sitting members of Parliament. This greatly weakens the scrutiny of government and strengthens the Executive.

² Such as is already in place in the UK's Scotland Act

Some checks do exist, like the ability to vote a government out (a Vote of No Confidence), formal opportunities to question ministers or the PM, or interventions by the courts, but the power of the Executive in the UK led to Lord Hailsham coining the term, ‘Elective Dictatorship.’

Potential solutions

Allow Parliament to set Parliament’s agenda: establish a House Business Committee which allows Parliament, rather than the government, to determine what is debated in Parliament and when.

Restrict Prime Ministerial Appointments: stop the Prime Minister from appointing to the House of Lords and top jobs in UK institutions such as the Judiciary, Academia, the BBC, etc. Instead, an independent Appointments Commission (or Parliament) should approve these appointments.

Act to restore and strengthen the independence of key organisations which safeguard our democracy: we welcome the fact that the government will no longer be setting the strategy and policy for the Electoral Commission, but would like further increases in its freedom to determine its key focus areas and its powers to act against those seeking to pervert the results of our elections. Provide longer term funding (rather than annual settlements) to regulators and vital institutions.

Establish Three Lines of Defence

Establishing three lines of defence is a management practice used in banking and other sectors to manage risk and compliance. A similar system could be implemented to protect the UK’s constitutional settlement and the constitutional laws previously identified. This is needed to ensure the other solutions identified are, and remain, effective. More detail is given in the main report.

Potential solutions

First line of defence: Operational Management. Ministers, their civil servants and special advisors manage the risks associated with new constitutional changes to ensure compliance with conventions, laws and scrutiny requirements.

Second line of defence: Oversight and Compliance. Parliament, Select Committees, the new Ethics and Integrity Commission, and the Independent Adviser on Ministerial Standards draw up policies to limit the risk of constitutional breaches and oversee Operational Management’s compliance with and application of those policies.

Third line of defence: Independent Assurance. The courts, and ultimately the Supreme Court, are given the final say and oversight of the UK’s constitutional settlement and how it is handled by government.

Even with action taken on these areas, our assessment is that the risk would remain too high to be acceptable, so further measures should also be taken.

Other non-constitutional changes

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 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 in the UK that no parliament can bind a future parliament, Osborne found an institutional mechanism (which has been effective so far at least) to circumvent this stricture.

Potential Solutions

Introduce Proportional Representation (PR). Our current voting system, first-past-the-post (FPTP), distorts voters’ intentions. Usually, it gives too large a majority to the party with most votes. Labour got a huge boost under FPTP at the last election (34% of the vote leading to 63% of the seats) whereas Reform UK got only 5 (less than 1%) seats for 16% of the vote. In contrast, PR ensures that parliament accurately reflects how people voted. If Reform UK were to win 30% of the votes, they might get a majority of seats under FPTP and, as things stand, would have little difficulty in implementing P2029; but under PR, they would have only 30% of the seats and would require coalition partners to enable them to implement P2029.

Put in place mechanisms such as memoranda of understanding or mutual defence agreements to cement Constitutional Prometheanism: the mutual protection of the independent actors who provide vital checks and balances (for example, the Judiciary, the Upper House, the Police, the Military, Academia, and the Fourth Estate). Hence, for example, if the Prime Minister sought to co-opt the Judiciary, the remaining actors would unite in opposition, using procedural barriers and raising public awareness of the risk of slipping into dictatorship. Measures such as granting longer term funding to institutions, insisting on independent appointments processes for key institutions, strengthening the independence of local government would increase the likelihood of these actors uniting against constitutional vandalism.

Immediate Steps for Government

These suggestions may seem daunting, but inaction is dangerous and there is little time to address the risks. We suggest the following immediate steps:

1. Request officials to conduct a rapid risk assessment to verify that our case for change is correct and fully understood by policy-makers;
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 a powerful communications strategy to highlight the risks associated with Project 2029 and to win the narrative war.

Each of these points is explored in detail in the main report.

Conclusion

‘Democracy on the Brink’ outlines clear vulnerabilities in the UK's uncoded constitution, exacerbated by foreign influences, disinformation, and executive dominance. These make the UK even more vulnerable to an autocratic takeover than America was.

There is still time to act. The government can learn from the failures in America and ensure that historians do not view Keir Starmer in the same light as they will Joe Biden – well-meaning but over-cautious in the face of a clear risk of authoritarianism.

Political leaders, civil society, and citizens must rally cross-party and public support for these reforms now.

Proactive defence of democracy is the strongest guarantee of a secure future for generations of Britons.

How you can help

To support action on this report:

Email info@unlockdemocracy.org.uk (subject line: ‘Cabinet Office’) giving your name, simply requesting that the Cabinet Office meet with the authors of the report to discuss its implications.