

A quarter of Tories switched to Farage



By **GLEN OWEN**

POLITICAL EDITOR

NEARLY a quarter of voters who backed Boris Johnson in 2019 abandoned the Conservatives in July's General Election for Nigel Farage's Reform UK, an authoritative analysis has found.

Research by Lord Ashcroft, conducted immediately after Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer secured his landslide win, reveals that only 52 per cent of those who voted Conservative in 2019 did so again this year – 23 per cent switched to Reform while 12 per cent backed Labour and 7 per cent voted for the Lib Dems.

The findings, published by the former deputy chairman of the Conservatives in his new book, *Losing It – The Conservative Party And The 2024 General Election*, will be studied intently by the four contenders for the leadership making their pitch for the job at this week's annual party conference in Birmingham.

Conservative strategists are split between those who believe the party should tack to the Right to claw back support from Reform and those who want to 'win from the centre' by scooping up Labour voters.

Lord Ashcroft's research shows widespread dissatisfaction with the Tories, with an astonishing 45

'They were stabbing each other in the back'

per cent of those who voted Tory in July saying that the party deserved to lose the election – a view shared by more than three quarters of all voters.

And his focus groups reveal some of the reasons for the defections included losing people's trust, a lack of competence and the impact of Partygate.

One defector said of Rishi Sunak's party: 'They became complacent. I see the Tory Party look-

Cleverly the contender Labour fears the most

MINISTERS say James Cleverly is the candidate they do not want as the next Tory leader.

'He's the most likely to appeal to moderate voters,' suggested one, while senior Government sources dismissed Kemi Badenoch as a threat to Labour, saying she is 'too divisive'.

Both are running to succeed Rishi Sunak, alongside Robert Jenrick and Tom Tugendhat. The candidates will set out their stall to party members at the annual conference, which starts today.

Mr Jenrick is the bookmakers'

By **Anna Mikhailova** and **Brendan Carlin**

favourite after topping a poll of Tory MPs, although allies of Ms Badenoch say she is the most popular with members, who will have the final say once the contest is whittled down to two.

But several Labour ministers have privately warned that Mr Cleverly, pictured, is the only one who could gather enough public support. 'The general view is that for Labour, Cleverly is the one we

wouldn't want,' a minister said. 'All the candidates have tacked to the Right but of the four, he's the least extreme and the most likely to appeal to moderate voters.' The source also said Mr Jenrick had lost credibility by abandoning his 'moderate' roots and 'tacking too far to the mad Tory Right'.

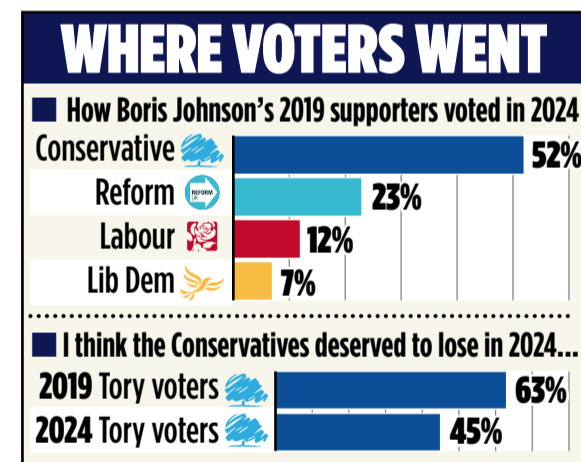
Another senior Labour MP, though, believes Ms Badenoch



poses 'the biggest threat' – in the Commons and in marginal, Brexit-voting seats. He said: 'In the Chamber, Kemi will do well against Keir.'

The new leader is due to be chosen on November 2. However, senior Conservatives are in talks to cut short the contest, so the winner is in post for Rachel Reeves's first Budget.

Rival camps have been accusing each other of 'dirty tricks', including



Reform 'ready to make deal'

THE Conservatives and Reform UK should consider a 'non-aggression pact' to oust Labour at the next general election, it was claimed last night.

Sources within Reform told The Mail on Sunday that the two parties need to start discussing a deal to boost their chances of defeating Sir Keir Starmer.

They said the two parties should copy an alleged private agreement between Labour and the Lib Dems at the General Election in July to back off from campaigning in a constituency if the other

was more likely to defeat a sitting Tory MP. One Reform source said: 'We should be talking about a non-aggression pact between us and the Tories to maximise our chances of kicking out Labour MPs.'

It was also suggested that of the four Tory leadership candidates, Robert Jenrick was the most likely to come to an agreement with Nigel Farage's party.

However, that was denied by a source close to Mr Jenrick's campaign, while a Reform spokesman insisted it 'will not be making any electoral pacts'.

pared to give Labour an average of 3.5 years to prove themselves before they decide whether to support them at the next election.

Despite the number of Tory voters defecting to Reform, there is

little support for a merger. Just 15 per cent Conservative voters and 26 per cent of Reform voters would like Mr Farage to join forces with whoever wins the Tory leadership.

In his introduction to his book, Lord Ashcroft writes: 'There is no reason why there must be only two major parties or, if there are, why the Conservatives must always be one of them.'

'For the Tories to approach any kind of recovery they will need to understand why they lost not just the election but the reputation for competent government that was once an indispensable part of their appeal. The Tories didn't so much play a difficult hand badly as drop all their cards on the floor.'

'People will understand and, to an extent, forgive the unenviable decisions that go with running the country. What really did for the Conservatives was a series of unforced errors.'

'They included a succession of unelected prime ministers, an experimental budget that produced the opposite of the economic stability that voters looked to the Tories to uphold, endless infighting, failure to keep promises and a growing impression the Conservatives were completely detached from their lives and concerns.'

● A total of 16,677 adults were surveyed between July 2 and 4, with a further 21,283 sampled between August 7 and 20. In addition, 24 focus groups of people who voted Conservative in 2019 but switched to Labour, the Lib Dems or Reform UK in 2024 were held in former Conservative constituencies between July 29 and September 3.



UPBEAT: Nigel Farage, above. Right: Tory hopeful Robert Jenrick arriving in Birmingham with his wife Michal yesterday

THE Tories will gather in Birmingham today, for their first conference since July's General Election disaster, in a much more cheerful mood than anyone could have expected.

Labour's approval ratings have plunged, following the grasping hypocrisy of 'freebiegate' and a string of unpopular decisions – from scrapping the winter fuel allowance for most pensioners to the early release of criminals. It's a grim start for a Government which, at least in terms of popularity, was never on a very firm footing to begin with.

Its huge majority is built on the lowest vote share ever achieved by a winning party.

In the survey I conducted last month, we offered people a wide range of possible explanations for the result and asked which they found most convincing. It turned out that enthusiasm for Starmer and Labour were bottom of the list.

I also found that people were willing to give the new regime only a limited time to prove itself before deciding whether or not it is doing a good job – and it hasn't exactly been a stellar start.

Many Conservatives will find this very encouraging. But they shouldn't – for two big reasons.

First, as the next Tory leader will soon discover, it is extremely hard to get attention for anything you say or do in opposition. People have heard quite enough of the Tories for the time being, and the party won't be able to get many to look at it again until they are ready.

That could be sooner than anyone could have thought. The scale of their defeat, emerging in the early hours of July 5, had suggested Labour could stay in power for two terms, at least. But after the start they've had, that seems less likely.

So when voters do look, the Tories will have to be ready too. This means that time is short.

However unpopular Labour have become after four or five years of Starmerite gloom, the Conservatives will benefit only if they have completely transformed their reputation.

The second reason is that Labour's tribulations could distract the Tories from the soul searching needed before such a transformation can take place. Some of them might even believe the voters will decide they have made a terrible mistake.

That is never going to happen – whatever this Government brings, the country is not going to regret kicking out the Tories.



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

POLITICAL AUTHOR AND POLLSTER

BEFORE they face the voters again, the Conservatives will need to understand and accept why they were not just beaten, but trounced.

One of the reasons the party took so long to recover after the 1997 Blair landslide was that this process took years. Now, with an insurgent Reform UK poised to extend its reach into what the Tories consider their territory, they do not have the luxury of time.

My research should help clarify why they lost not just the election but the reputation for competent government that was once the basis for their appeal. Many will think the answers are so obvious as to be barely worth writing down. But it is human nature, not least among politicians, to learn only the lessons that suit you.

Some claimed the Tories drifted too far to the Right, others that they were not conservative enough. But among voters who abandoned the Tories in 2024, the more common criticism of the political direction was that they didn't have one. After so many years in power,

Don't be gulled by Labour's rocky start. The Conservatives have a huge task to restore their reputation for competent government

going to Reform were exasperated at NHS waiting times.

Whichever direction they had scattered, former Tories told us that at its best the party stood for stable government and common sense, and were there for people who work and save and try to do the right thing. This is what has been lost – barely one in ten defectors said they thought the party was on the side of people like them.

The next leader will have to rediscover that formula. They will have the even harder task of winning back trust from voters who are not just disappointed but angry. Their first step is to understand exactly why that is how they feel.



from Biteback Publishing. His research is available at LordAshcroftPolls.com.

● Lord Ashcroft is an author, businessman, philanthropist and pollster. *Losing It: The Conservative Party And The 2024 General Election*, priced £10, is available