

Carswell's defection to UKIP will harm Cameron because it was based on principle, but don't expect other Eurosceptics to follow

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The decision of Douglas Carswell, MP for Clacton and leading Eurosceptic, to defect to UKIP was quickly and rightfully interpreted as a blow to the Conservatives' chance of a 2015 General Election victory. However, this defection is really just the latest episode reflecting long-term trends that are reshaping British politics, writes [James Dennison](#).



Contrary to claims by detractors [inside](#) and [outside](#) of the Conservative Party, Douglas Carswell's decision is not about electoral calculations. He had a huge majority of 12,000 and uncommon support as a local MP. He would have won his seat in 2015 under the Tory banner. Instead, the Clacton MP's decision seems to be one of principle and influence, not exclusively vis-a-vis Europe, though this remains the headline issue. Carswell's is a case that undermines the argument put forward in [academic circles](#) and by [pundits in Brussels](#) that anti-EU overtures by British Conservatives are merely an electoral ploy to fend off UKIP at the polls. The youngest generation of Conservative MPs cut their political teeth during events such as the ERM disaster and the domestically turbulent Maastricht negotiations, only to have their misgivings toward the European project fortified by the Eurozone's prolonged sovereign debt crises. For this group of hard-Eurosceptic Conservatives, [mostly elected in 2010 and all confined to the backbenches](#), the goal of withdrawing Britain from the EU transcends party politics. Carswell's dramatic exit from the Conservative Party is the most advanced manifestation of their desire to date.

The unveiling of Carswell as a UKIP member saw his speech centre on a damning assessment of Cameron's '[renegotiation-referendum](#)' European strategy. Carswell [first](#) accused Cameron's government of incompetence on the issue – 'They haven't thought it through ... Ministers are simply not up to giving us the kind of realignment we need.' However, the accusation that will linger the longest is that the strategy of renegotiation is nothing more than a cynical ploy. Carswell claims to have been repeatedly told by Conservative advisers that they will seek the 'bare minimum' by giving 'just enough to persuade enough of them [the electorate] to stay in.' Cameron's strategy has long been [portrayed](#) as a reactive attempt to secure the Eurosceptic vote in the 2015 election rather than actively protecting British interests. Carswell claims that the result of this purely electoral calculation is that little thought has gone towards the actual renegotiation itself, the still unknown aims of which have left those in Brussels and major European capitals bemused. Such a dramatic condemnation, albeit from a backbencher not widely known in the general public, will reinforce the caricature already held by traditional, [older](#) conservatives that Cameron is superficial and untrustworthy. Carswell's defection may tip the balance for those traditional [Tory voters who opted for UKIP](#) at the 2014 European Elections and have not yet decided whether to 'return' to the Conservatives in 2015.

What now for those radical Eurosceptic Tories that Carswell leaves behind? Of [the 80 hard-Eurosceptics](#), already there are [rumours of nine or so MPs](#) who might defect to UKIP, but the most obvious contenders – Nadine Dorries, David Nuttall, and Daniel Hannan (MEP) – have ruled themselves out. Perhaps that is because, in reality, Carswell did not represent all of the Eurosceptic MPs, which are now many, but a more specific group for whom withdrawal from the EU was just part of a broader democratising mission. For all but this clique, Carswell's aims of proportional representation, direct democracy, localism and the disestablishment of the Church of England do more than raise eyebrows. If any other MPs do defect, the [most likely may be Zac Goldsmith, the former editor of The Ecologist](#) who, like Carswell, is young, radical and, as a multi-millionaire, in little need of the Conservative Party to get re-elected. He also shares Carswell's irreverence to the Tory hierarchy. Those Eurosceptic MPs who need the Conservative Party machinery to be re-elected will, of course, stay loyal. Those who do not or would do better with a UKIP rosette are most likely to defect. Carswell's decision to call a by-election to 'legitimise' taking the UKIP whip has also set a

prohibitive precedent that only those most sure of immediate victory at the polls would like to follow. Henceforth, intermittent defections from the Conservatives to UKIP are possible, but electoral imperatives preclude any coming mass defection of even a half dozen MPs.

For UKIP, not only have they probably managed to get representation in the House of Commons and give Mr Cameron a bloody nose, but, by bringing on board a reasonably well-respected and principled thinker, they have lent intellectual credibility to their cause. The good news, however, may stop there. Until now, the party has at times appeared to be a Nigel Farage vehicle, and many in the party faithful share Farage's pint-swilling and chain-smoking habits, as well as his disdain for a hypocritical political class that takes itself too seriously. In terms of personality, it is hard to see the serious-minded Carswell, who was as embroiled in the expenses scandal as any other MP, fitting in. What influence Carswell will have on UKIP's so far threadbare range of policies also remains to be seen. However, despite [The Economist](#) predicting that Carswell will hasten a conflict between the different wings of UKIP, he ticks enough boxes – Euroscepticism, controlled borders and directly democratic government – to appeal to both the authoritarian and libertarian sects within the party. The bigger question will be how Nigel Farage gets on sharing a stage. For now, this is a huge success for Britain's newest major party.

Carswell's confidence of winning the upcoming by-election and next general election under the UKIP banner points to two major trends in British politics. First and most obvious is the rise of UKIP, which did not even field a candidate in Clacton in 2010, despite the constituency being, according to [Matthew Goodwin's recent work](#), the most UKIP-friendly seat by demography in the UK. Second, his likely victory highlights the ability of a select few politicians to fill the vacuum created by the [decline of party allegiances](#). As Carswell, who clearly believes that enough of his 12,000 majority was the result of his personal appeal rather than his former party, said after his defection, there is 'a huge slice of the electorate that doesn't care about party at all'. Both of these developments are combining to create a less predictable party political system.

Finally, where does Carswell go from here? Nigel Farage's prediction that his new ally is not going to be 'regarded as an isolated eccentric' could equally apply to their vision for Britain's future outside of the EU. The MP is leaving the comfort and influence of a big club in the name of democracy. This could have two potential fates. On the one hand, Carswell, like Britain, now unhindered by an unaccountable and complacent leadership, may gain power by being free to act boldly and more flexibly, gaining respect and support on the way. He may even come to be seen as a trailblazer who other, similarly minded, politicians follow, restructuring the system in doing so. An alternative scenario is that Carswell, like a post-Brexit UK, may decline into irrelevance as his influence on a powerful here-to-stay bloc fades. His erstwhile enthusiastic supporters will look elsewhere in the political marketplace for similarly free-market minded but more influential and integrated homes. For Carswell, which of these scenarios plays out largely rests on whether others follow him, how UKIP can operate beyond the Nigel Farage show and just how deep the changes in British politics are. Regardless and ironically, the chances of a Conservative majority in 2015 – so far the most likely route to a referendum on 'the European question' – just fell.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: European Parliament CC BY 2.0

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