

# We can increasingly see signs that the Coalition is following the same trajectory towards election failure as recent long-serving governments

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-degeneration-of-the-coalition-can-the-conservatives-win-in-2015/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-degeneration-of-the-coalition-can-the-conservatives-win-in-2015/)

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**Andrew Crines** uses the degenerative tendencies model as a basis to offer predictions for the general election. This approach holds that if a number of key issues are empirically identifiable within a long-serving government then these will serve as indicators of forthcoming election failure. While these issues are still embryonic within the present administration, it looks increasingly likely that they will go the way of past long-serving governments unless we see a rapid reversal of fortune.



As we get closer to the general election, political pundits, academics and politicians themselves are all starting to try and predict the likely outcome. However using polling data of voting intentions risks a high degree of uncertainty because people's views and perceptions change. So, my PSA conference paper for the [Conservatives and Conservatism Specialist Group](#) posited an alternative way of forecasting whether the Tories can win – I used the degenerative tendencies model that has been thoroughly utilised by respected scholars such as Tim Heppell.

This model, which has been used on long serving governments, suggests that five key issues need to be evident in a government that ultimately gets voted out of office. Those are governing competence, leadership credibility, ideological controversies, abuse of power, and a renewed opposition and a time for a change within the party. It had been used on the Macmillan government, the Thatcher/Major government, and on the Blair/Brown government. In each these given areas were found. As such I argued that if those same signs can be found in the Conservative-led government today, then it would be reasonable to project they would suffer that same fate.

In terms of governing competence, the Conservatives argued they should be judged based on economic performance, with the triple A rating as its key measure and the promise of growing GDP after 2012. Given the hesitation of the economy to recover, and indeed some suggesting the austerity agenda is a part of the reason for that hesitation, their economic competence is called into question. Granted, it could be argued that this is the result of more global economic issues. However, given the rhetoric in the early stages of the Coalition revolved around a successful economy, its failure ultimately is attributed to a lack of competence. George Osborne's initial economic strategy was designed to return Britain to growth without a significant deficit by 2015. This failure can be attributed to fiscal realities and a misjudged overpromise that calls into question their economic and governing competence, making them vulnerable to the first criteria of degeneration.

With regards to leadership credibility Cameron has never been forgiven by the Conservative old guard for failing to secure a majority. Certainly in the run up to 2010 the Conservatives highlighted the flaws of Coalition, describing them as unstable and unworkable. It must be noted that in Britain the 9 year Coalition Government of the 1930s and Churchill's National Government proved resilient, subverting earlier claims. Indeed, the 2010 Coalition has proved as resilient. For Cameron, he has remained in place because he at least secured power for the Conservatives in that Coalition. However over the thorny issue of Europe, the uncertainty of the modernisation agenda and its future, and the sense of growing detachment from the backbenchers have led to rumblings of discontent about Cameron's leadership. Cameron's credibility is undermined because he is starting to fall behind Miliband as a likeable leader. The more he falls behind Miliband, the harder it will be for him to maintain party management, which could prove corrosive in the run up to 2015. This makes the Conservatives vulnerable to the second criteria of degeneration.

The ideological controversies concern both economic and social issues and how they related to the broader party membership. Put simply the gay marriage agenda jars with many social conservatives, which creates unease about

the direction the party seems to heading in. In opposition Cameron attempted to highlight the importance of the environment, NHS, and foreign aid. This was, as Tim Bale suggests, vital in cooling the ideological controversies of opposition whilst seeking to capture the all-important Blairite centre ground. However, the economics of neoliberalism have challenged those opposition principles, with a growing free market in education and health, attacks on welfare, and curbs to immigration. Scholars such as Richard Hayton have highlighted the necessity for caution when embracing the modernisation narrative, however given their electoral strategy was so heavily dependent on its perception then this could prove problematic in 2015. The Clinton saying “It’s the economy, stupid” find the Conservatives essentially Thatcherite, which entirely subverts the perception they attempted to create prior to 2010. Although such issues can hardly be described as ‘wet vs dry’, it does demonstrate that ideological divisions remain and so erode perceptions of unity, making them vulnerable to the third criteria of degeneration.

With regards to abuses of power the Conservatives have found themselves in some difficulty in this area since 2010. For example, the cash for influence scandal, the resignation of Liam Fox after he was compromised by his association with Adam Werrity, the Cash for Access scandal involving Cameron and donors, and of course the relationship between the Conservative Party and News International. The problem with the News International scandal is that it has longevity, which over time may prove corrosive. The closeness of Cameron and other high profile Conservatives with those involved in the hacking scandal has confirm the existence of a perceived elitism which suggests undue influence upon party policy. Moreover as legal proceedings continue this risks remaining a perceived abuse of power up to 2015 and beyond.

The final area concerns the renewed opposition and sense of the need for change. One Nation Labour is starting to find its feet, however it has yet to resonate with the electorate because of its relative newness. However, as the election comes closer, Labour’s alternative will be presented to the electorate in a way designed to be more appealing. Whether Miliband will be able to convince the electorate of its validity, however is yet to be seen. The main issue at the moment, however, is not the Labour Party. Rather it is the sense of change from within. Rumbings have yet to mature, however they are evident with Boris continually threatening to become the new stalking Heseltine that would enable a more credible leader to step forward. For example, Theresa May, Michael Gove, and Philip Hammond have each been cited as having leadership aspirations. The May elections, and continuing rise of UKIP, and the ensuing party management issues will determine whether Cameron faces the inevitable fate of a leader seen to be leading them to defeat.

In each of the five degenerative areas, *signs* are evident of the same symptoms of governments which ultimately were voted out of office, however they are not yet fully manifest. It is important to note that I am simply identifying them as embryonic. They are, at this stage, by no means terminal and should corrective action be taken then it is possible the Conservatives would win. Like my PSA paper, I am shying away from arguing they will lose, but I am saying the signs are evident. It is very possible that Cameron may be able to regain control by re-consolidating his position through an economic recovery. But it is important to remember that historically – as identified in the prior scholarship – when these five signs begin they grow from being minor irritations into full manifestations of collapsing statecraft. It is also important to consider the impact of Coalition politics as a key factor. For the moment such tendencies are minor, but these seeds tend to mature because leaders often lose control of their Parliamentary party once they are planted.

*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.*

## **About the author**

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