

I sat up that night in July 2024, not because I thought anything unexpected was coming — Labour were going to win; the whole country knew it — but to watch what the win looked like when it arrived. It looked like a hole. Four hundred and eleven seats. A majority large enough to have fitted another country inside it, and underneath that, 33.7 per cent of the vote, the lowest share any British government has taken in modern times. They were cheering in the studio. On the map the red wall was blown back. In the kitchen I thought of Tony Blair, and how long it had been since anyone said “people’s party” without wincing a little.

Two years on, a Sunday night in September 2026, I was watching something else. Saxony-Anhalt. A German state most people here couldn’t point to. The AfD took 43.8 per cent — not a poll, not a protest, an election. The CDU, in charge there for more than twenty years, slumped to 17. The firewall still holds, they say in Berlin. Three seats short of a majority on its own. I recognised the tone. We used it about Ukip in 2014, the Brexit Party in 2019, Reform in 2024. They can win votes but not power. Then they win power anyway, only somewhere else first.

I can’t shake the line: the centre didn’t die of a crisis. It died of stopping being a home.

I grew up thinking of Europe as a furnished room. Social democrats in one corner of the sofa, Christian Democrats or Conservatives in the other. They argued about tax and the health service, but the room belonged to them. Blair and Schröder, Jospin and Aznar, Persson and Kok. The Third Way wasn’t only a strategy. It was the feeling that history had settled down. You tamed the market; you didn’t abolish it. You opened the nation; you didn’t dissolve it. Parties governed. They didn’t preach.

That room is empty now.

The SPD, which once carried the Bonn Republic on its shoulders, took 16.4 per cent at the 2025 Bundestag election — not a poor year so much as the worst it has ever had. Scholz went. In France the Parti Socialiste is a ghost: Hidalgo on 1.74 per cent in the 2022 presidential race, ten years after Hollande had won the Élysée and the Assembly both. Greek Pasok, the party that named the disease, fell from nearly 44 per cent in 2009 to under five in 2015. The Dutch PvdA stayed alive by climbing into GroenLinks’s lap. Austria’s SPÖ posted its worst result since the war in 2024.

The centre-right has lost as much, only with less noise. Merkel’s long run hid how much capital the CDU was already spending. In 2025 Friedrich Merz won on 28.5 per cent, a result that in any other decade would have been called a catastrophe. Les Républicains, such as they were after de Gaulle, managed 4.78 per cent with Valérie Pécresse in 2022 and then split when Éric Ciotti put a hand out to the

Rassemblement National. Italy's Christian Democrats didn't vanish. They decayed. Voters moved first to Berlusconi, then to someone who no longer bothered pretending to be the middle.

The British reflex is to look at this and say: proportional systems, the Continent, not our problem. It's the nicest lie we have. First-past-the-post hides the movement. It doesn't stop it. Reform took 14.3 per cent in 2024 and five seats. The Liberal Democrats took fewer votes and seventy-two seats. The same night Labour went into Downing Street on a landslide built from about a third of those who turned out. Peter Mair wrote in 2013 that the party age was already finished — the organisations were still there, but they had stopped carrying the democracy. Ruling the Void. That title wasn't a flourish. It was the diagnosis. Labour's win in 2024 was the same diagnosis, counted out in seats.

What wore away wasn't only the vote share. It was the claim to speak from somewhere. The big parties started talking like managers. You could see it early here. New Labour took over the Tories' economic language and left the old industrial towns feeling as if the furniture had been swapped while they slept. The 2010–15 coalition did for the Liberal Democrats: five years in office, then eight seats. Clegg became a byword for selling out. Hard on the man, right about the pattern. Small parties that walk into large rooms come out smaller.

The same pattern wore down the SPD in the grand coalitions with the CDU, and it finished the German liberals in 2025, when the FDP blew up the traffic-light government and left the Bundestag on 4.3 per cent. People don't only punish the policy. They punish the sense that the election no longer chooses anything much.

What filled the gap wasn't silence. It was voices that sounded as if they belonged to someone. Marine Le Pen. Giorgia Meloni. Geert Wilders. Herbert Kickl. Jimmie Åkesson. Nigel Farage, three party names later and still the same point: you stopped listening. Fratelli d'Italia went from four per cent in 2018 to running Italy in 2022. The PVV won the Netherlands in 2023. The FPÖ won a national election for the first time in 2024. The AfD came second in Germany in 2025 and first in the east. The Sweden Democrats overtook the Moderates and put a right-wing government in place without joining it. In England Reform took ten county councils in 2025, another sweep in 2026, and now leads the national polls — or ties, depending which one you open. YouGov, early September: Labour 23, Reform 23. Dead level, mid-parliament.

These parties are not one thing. Treating them as if they were is sloppy, and sloppiness is how the centre talked itself out of the room to begin with. Meloni governs. Farage campaigns. The AfD is partly another animal, and Germans see that more clearly than we do. They are answering the same vacancy, though. Immigration isn't the whole story. It's the part you can put a finger on. Behind it are the factories that shut, the streets that changed language, the schools that

changed tone, a union that felt as if it decided without asking, and a press that kept insisting the worry was something else.

Norris and Inglehart called it cultural backlash: the people who never boarded the quiet revolution in values — older, no degree, working-class, white, churchgoing, male, rural — push back. The trouble with that account is the young. They vote for these parties too now, in eastern Germany and in English market towns. Rodrik's survey of the research puts economic insecurity at about a third of the rise. A third is not nothing. The other two-thirds is what the centre parties would not put into words.

Hooghe and Marks described a new divide, the transnational one, GAL against TAN, openness against sovereignty, cutting across the old left-right line. Kitschelt spotted it early. Mudde calls the fourth wave mainstreaming: the old parties start borrowing the challengers' language. The Tidö agreement. The Tories' asylum stance after 2019. Labour's sudden concern for borders once the numbers turned. That isn't mainly hypocrisy. It's arriving late.

Social media did the last of it, not by tricking anyone — which is the version that flatters people who already think they're right — but by taking away the filter the old parties had lived behind. You don't need the Guardian or Bild or Le Monde to reach a million people any more. The AfD's grip on younger voters in some east German contests isn't a puzzle. It's what you get when the angriest party is also first in the feed.

There are exceptions, and they matter.

Swedish Social Democrats reached 30.3 per cent in 2022 and still lost office, which is a different sort of beating, not a collapse. Spain's PSOE held 31.7 per cent in 2023 and stayed in the Moncloa. Macron invented a party and won. In the Netherlands in 2025, after Wilders's cabinet fell apart from the inside, D66 under Rob Jetten came first for the first time, just: 16.9 to the PVV's 16.7, twenty-six seats each. Close enough to show the centre isn't finished everywhere — only homeless where it has forgotten how to say what it's for.

The Liberal Democrats here are the local version of that exception. Wrecked in 2015, back in 2024 with seventy-two seats, their best since 1923. They won on the map, and on being what the Tories had stopped being in the south. A real win, and still not a people's party.

So Pasokification isn't fate. The escape route is still narrow. You need a voting system that forgives you, an opponent that splits, or a politician who can still talk as if the country is a room people share. Those people exist. There aren't enough of them left to furnish a continent.

From a kitchen in Britain the Continent looks like our future with the subtitles on.

Brexit wasn't a break in this story. It was the first chapter we wrote ourselves. In 2016 a thin majority said the national frame still counted. The losers treated the answer as a muddle. The winners didn't know what to do with it. The old parties kept losing ground anyway. In 2024 the Conservatives didn't only lose office. They lost the right to call themselves the national party. Labour took office and, bit by bit, lost the towns that used to be the party. The red wall went up in 2019, came down in 2024, and is now a place where Reform and Labour argue over the same memory.

That is why Saxony-Anhalt isn't just a German story. It's a reminder of what happens when the barriers slip. First-past-the-post has been our firewall. It has given us governments with thin popular roots and oppositions with thick ones, and it has also let us believe two parties are still enough. They aren't. Not when 14 per cent is five seats one year and council after council the next. Not when the next election, whenever it comes, may be fought between a prime minister who won on a third of the vote and a movement that spent years being treated like a phone-in.

I don't miss the 1990s. That would be silly. The Blair years had their own hollowness, their own wars, their own certainty that history was done. What I miss is the idea that a party can be larger than its base — that it can hold the teacher in Islington and the welder in Workington without one of them having to be written off so the other feels noticed. When that idea goes, you are left with camps. Camps can win elections. They are rarely much good at governing a country people still have to share.

Democracy doesn't stop because the centre gives way. It changes register: louder, sharper at the edges, worse at compromise, quicker to mark who no longer counts. In Germany they call the resistance the firewall and historical responsibility. In France it's the republican front, and it holds until it doesn't. Here it's the voting system, and the voting system is a device, not a virtue.

I don't know if Reform forms a government next time. I don't know if the AfD gets a chair in Magdeburg. I do know we are no longer asking whether the old parties will come back to the room they left. The room has been let. The pretence that the key is still on the hall table is finished. The question now is who lives there — and on whose authority.

/Staffan Scherloff