On December 16th a parliamentary by-election was held in the United Kingdom, to fill the vacancy created by the forced resignation of Conservative MP Owen Paterson, who was found guilty of breaking lobbying rules and then thrown under the proverbial bus when Boris Johnson tried to change the rules to stop him being censured for it.

**But Why Should We Even be Concerned?**

Such elections sometimes make a splash at the time, but only domestically, and often only in political circles. However this one seems to be displacing the events at Concord Massachusetts in 1775 as “The Shot Heard Round The World” or on level with events which sparked WW1.

News outlets in an array of countries, some less known for being part of the media mainstream, have made their readers aware there is a place called “North Shropshire”, in which Boris Johnson’s party suffered a humiliating defeat. It wasn’t the biggest by-election swing in British history, but it is in the top ten. So what does this mean for BoJo and his clowns, and his signature policy, Brexit?

Was this a rejection of Brexit or a rejection of Johnson’s leadership? How long will this trend last? Are the Liberal Democrats on the way back? Are the anti-Tory forces voting tactically for the candidate best placed to beat them? Or was this yet another one of these transient by-elections which will have no bearing on the result of the next general election, whenever that is?

These are legitimate questions, but unfortunately they are generating a lot of ridiculous answers. Even Sir John Curtice, the highly respected political analyst from Strathclyde University, has failed to grasp the essential message
of this election for the Tories, and why it is fascinating everyone else, without them realising it.

The reason this election matters is not because anything has changed, but because a long existing reality has been made all the clearer, and voter behaviour is changing. We all try to ignore it, but it is not going to go away – and we are trying to ignore it because the consequences for democracy, any democracy, are too unpleasant to contemplate.

Blowing Up The Middle Ground

How does a party win an election? It starts with a certain number of core supporters, which it tries to keep happy, and then attempts to capture the supporters of other parties and none, either by persuading them it has better solutions this time round, or limiting enthusiasm for their opponents so their supporters don’t bother voting.

That is the traditional explanation. Even in democracies in which the same party has retained government for decades, like Japan or Sweden, the system survives because there is always a possibility that voters will change sides, and can hold their representatives accountable by threatening to do so.

The United Kingdom has swung quite regularly between Conservative and Labour governments. A common complaint of these parties’ detractors is that it is hard to tell them apart – indeed, each has always had a prominent segment of members who culturally belong on the other side, or who views would seem to align them more with the other side than with their own.

But for the past fifty years British elections have not been won or lost by whoever captures the middle ground. The decisive factor has been who can be the opposite of what they are – politicians who claim they want to destroy the political system, rather than make it work.

Often there are significant ideological differences between the parties which have attracted the anti-establishment vote. The old Liberal Party was centrist, the National Front and BNP on the far right, but at different times they have had the same supporters, depending on what they are fighting against.

The one thing all these parties have in common is that they appeal to those who feel politicians don’t care about them. Which is fine is you remain perpetually on the outside. But what if you win? What if you become the establishment yourself, and are held responsible for the crimes of the system as a whole?

People are entitled to vote for outsiders simply because they are outsiders. But to retain those votes, parties need something more. If they can’t offer it, not only does another party claim the anti-establishment vote, but voting for anti-establishment parties creates an endless cycle of posturing and failure, in which nothing ever gets done.

The North Shropshire by-election did not see any sea change in voting habits. It simply saw the transfer of the anti-establishment vote from one lot of outsiders to another, so the same forces could continue to hold the seat.

Sooner or later the winning Liberal Democrat will be abandoned by her supporters simply because she won. Someone else will be raised up and knocked down before they can bring the outsiders in, and make them count – because such is their distaste for the system that they would rather think they are being picked on than do anything about it.

Perpetual Non-Revolution

This is the second impressive by-election gain by the Liberal Democrats in this parliament. It was a much bigger victory than anyone dared predict, and the party had only finished a distant third last time round, with a mere 10% of the vote.

This area had previously been represented by Conservatives for 200 years, with one short break. It has no large towns, only small ones, and therefore no concentration of industrial working class voters. It voted 60/40 in favour of Brexit, and has more white and elderly voters than most constituencies.

Therefore the scope for change was considered very small. But why are these rural residents Conservative?

Because they want to keep what little they have, not create a neoliberal economy full of risk. They are conservative in the same way traditional Labour supporters in poor areas are conservative - the less people have, the more they fight to keep it from those they believe are not their own kind, different people with different ideas and needs.

The better off you are, the more liberal, or intellectually socialist, you can afford to be. Taxing and spending to do new things won’t affect you too much.
North Shropshire is mostly agricultural, therefore at odds with a predominantly industrial world. Its other industries are generally small and local rather than large - so if they go, the prospects of the town they are in go. Far from being the home of Conservative wealth and privilege, it is the domain of outsiders who are Conservative to protect themselves from fashion as best they can.

Many of the 60% of North Shropshire residents who voted for Brexit moved over to the LibDems at the by-election, despite it being the most anti-Brexit party. This is because Brexit is now the norm. No longer does it represent the dream of the unjustly excluded, but the nightmare of the justly offended.

Few people think Brexit is working in practice, but now the British system, and those who run it, have to get the blame. Labour is still a party of the establishment, which is why it is not winning by-elections itself, even in more promising territory, and lost the once vastly Labour Hartlepool to the Brexiteer Conservatives.

The ragged LibDems are more the outsiders. So the same voters are continuing to vote the same way, simply changing the name they attach to their views, not their views themselves.

### Hating Your Own Face

There was a time when the Liberal Democrats, and their predecessors the Liberal Party and the SDP, were expected to do these sort of things. Liberalism disintegrated as a coherent political philosophy in the UK, and the Liberals were reduced to only five parliamentary seats at one point.

Then the party rebuilt as a vehicle of protest. It was the one people turned to when the one they culturally belonged to no longer represented them and their opinions, as the saw it.

This was ultimately the party’s problem: there were Liberals and later Social Democrats of all shapes and sizes, who never formed a cohesive cultural unit. So when the LibDems started winning at local government level, and steadily increasing their parliamentary representation, they became victims of their own success – part of the problem, rather than the solution, to the anti-establishment voters.

No one knew what a Liberal Democrat looked or sounded like, so the anti-establishment vote was all the party had. When other people came along trying to overturn the established order, its vote stagnated and then declined precipitously after 2010, when it went into a coalition government, seeming to serve no purpose if it was no longer excluded.

With Liberals no longer a protest force, the anti-establishment vote split in various directions. Margaret Thatcher hoovered up much of it in 1979, promising a new style of no-nonsense divisiveness to those failed by rudderless socialism. Tony Blair offered a type of Labour Party so new and strange it was worth the anti-establishment vote taking a punt on.

Various extreme groups came and went until UKIP and the Brexiteers gathered the same forces behind them, and prevented the big parties doing the same. This is why ideological extremists like Jeremy Corbyn, and hideous monstrosities like Boris Johnson, recast their establishment parties as book burners, and were surprisingly successful in doing so, for a time.

But you have to remain outside to keep that one trick pony show on the road. Corbyn was shunted out by Brexit, which cut across party lines and made his Labour seem as establishment as ever, however a broad church it was. BoJo’s gang are rapidly showing themselves to be a bunch of crooks, who exclude everyone else from the robbery of those their supporters didn’t like.

The floating voters in the middle ground change very little. Victory goes to whoever can attract the people who hate all politicians and everything they stand for, but feel obliged to put up with them. The problem is: who can ever win, if those are the rules of the game?

### Chairs Which Won’t Face the Music

Boris Johnson relied on the anti-establishment vote to get him into power. Within his party, he was the rogue who would say what others were afraid of saying, even if it was a pack of lies or made no sense. In parliament he owes his majority to traditional Labour seats electing Conservatives, often for the first time ever, because Labour were the establishment in those places and the Tories the Brexiteer system-bashers.

Now he is rapidly losing that voter segment because most of them don’t really want to be included. It would damage
their identities too much to be the people who made the rules instead of complaining about them. Even if Boris turned the whole state apparatus over to his supporters, all they would do is bash those who were there before, do the opposite for the sake of it and then run away claiming to be persecuted at the first opportunity.

Brexiteers were very fond of saying after their referendum, which was supposed to be advisory only, “which part of democracy don’t you understand?” Yet it is Brexiteers themselves, the latest manifestation of the anti-establishment voter bloc, who don’t understand that if you win an election, you have to take responsibility for what you do, not just object to what others do.

These voters are remaining Brexiteers, but running from the consequences of being so. Just as the anti-establishment vote has always done, and always will, because that is the whole point of it.

This wouldn’t matter if these voters were only one element of the electoral mix. But increasingly they are the decisive element. If you want to win elections you have to be dedicated to tearing everything down and never building anything up – because if you did anything worthwhile, that would make you part of the establishment, as something which isn’t worthwhile doesn’t have enough substance to be torn down.

When the anti-establishment vote is the difference between winning and losing, a democracy is going nowhere and achieving nothing. The cure for that is to include the excluded, so all groups are part of a culture in which all are respected. But wilfully anti-establishment voters can’t do that – and those who owe their power to them will never be able to do so either; however good their intentions, as their own voters can’t bear to allow them to get away with it, and be proved wrong.

And this is one election that is the first sign of things to come, and it should be a warning of things to come with midterm election in the US—people are tired of the main political parties and for good reason.

*Seth Ferris, investigative journalist and political scientist, expert on Middle Eastern affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”.*