



PROJECT ROME

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Editorial

Labour's northern heartlands were always going to be a key battleground during this general election campaign, with the Conservatives betting the house on winning previously 'safe' Labour seats.

The focus on the north will only intensify following the publication of the Times/YouGov poll, which indicated that the Conservative's tactics were working, with Boris Johnson heading for a healthy majority on the back of gains from Labour in the north and Midlands.

According to the poll, Labour are predicted to lose 10 seats in Yorkshire, and a further 9 in the North West.

The YouGov polling methodology, based on seat-by-seat analysis is widely regarded as the most extensive and accurate polling available. It was the only polling company that correctly predicted a hung parliament in 2017.

The polling should have sent shivers down the spines of Labour strategists in the north and brought a pre-festive cheer to a Conservative party for whom this appears to be an early

vindication of their risky strategy. Certainly, that's how some activists took the news.

When questioned by Northern Agenda on the morning the YouGov poll was published, one key Labour campaign aide simply said, "Go away. I'm too depressed to even think about it." On the other hand, a senior Conservative told Northern Agenda, "This is the revenge of the towns. Labour's obsession is always the big cities, but we've been working away at the forgotten towns and it's paying dividends."

However, this isn't always the reaction we have been getting from people on both sides of the political divide here in the north. If anything, the polling news appears to have energised Labour activists, who believe that it will scare wavering voters back to them. One Labour insider told Northern Agenda, "We've been picking up a lot of Labour Remain voters thinking of voting Lib-Dem or Green, and a lot of Labour Leave voters flirting with the idea of voting Brexit party, both groups just wanting to give Labour a kicking. We can now go back

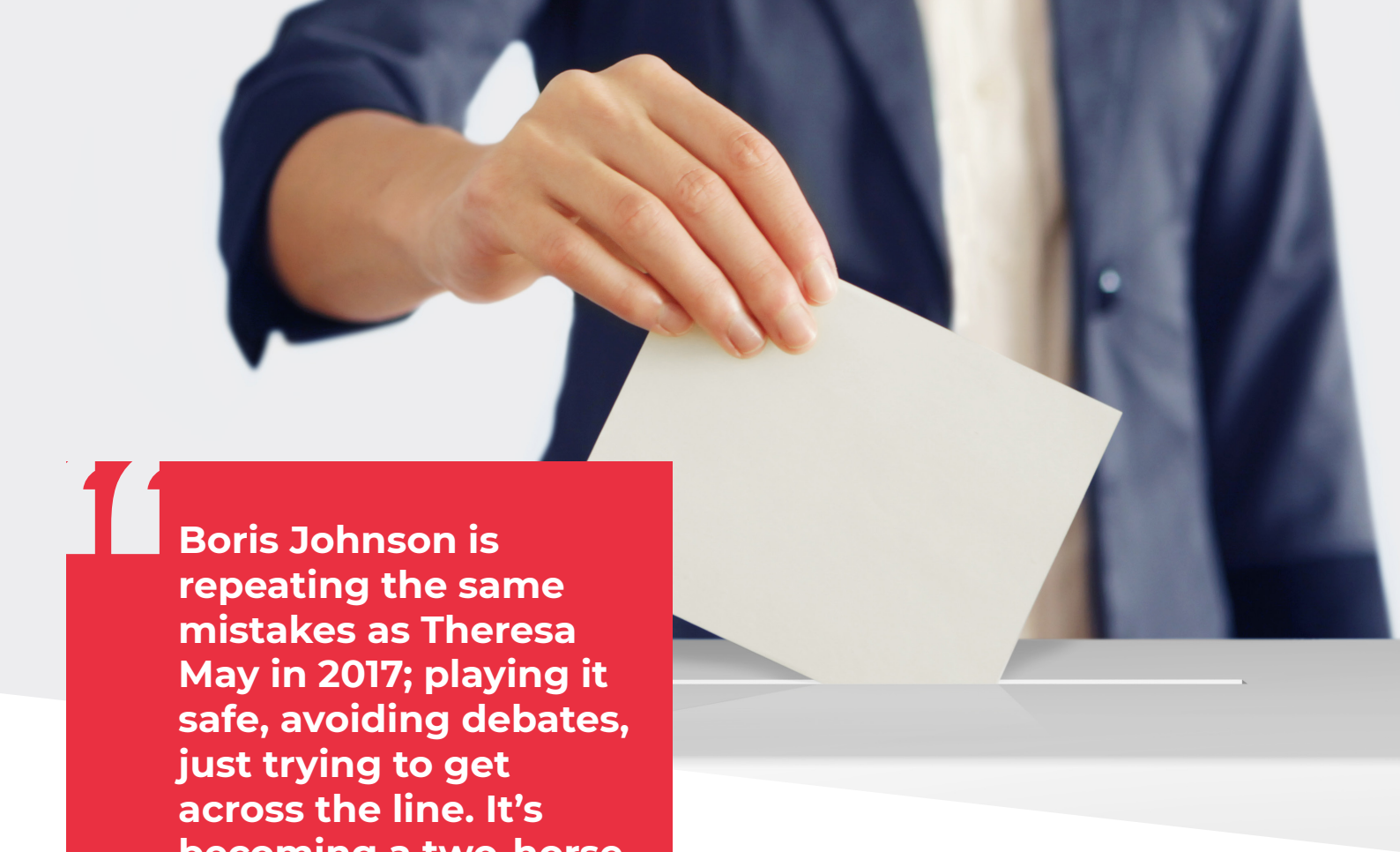
to them and scare them to death with the idea that their votes will be handing Boris Johnson a thumping majority." Another key Labour activist told us, "This is a snapshot of what voters thought over a week ago; it's not an accurate prediction. It's all to play for."

Likewise, some Conservative candidates and activists privately see this polling news as a potentially dangerous development so long out from polling day. One senior Conservative told Northern Agenda, "Complacency is our number one enemy, and this could be fatal to our chances in some key target seats. As the old saying goes, 'polls don't predict the outcome of elections; they help shape the outcome.' I think this has probably been a gift to Labour."

Another bullish Labour figure was equally adamant that the game was still afoot, telling Northern Agenda, "Boris Johnson is repeating the same mistakes as Theresa May in 2017;

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This counterintuitive reaction of both parties to YouGov's polling numbers is possibly justified when you look behind the headline figures.

For a start, nationally, 30 of the seats which YouGov are predicting will switch to the Conservatives are below a 5% margin. With recent opinion polls narrowing anyway a small drop in the Conservatives poll lead from 11% to 7% could cost Mr Johnson his majority. Anecdotal evidence from campaigners on the doorstep suggests there are a larger than usual group of voters who have yet to make up their minds. It is impossible to tell if this latest polling will swing their votes one way or another.

The polling will undoubtedly lead to a change in the tactics of both parties. Labour are reportedly sending their more Leave-leaning senior figures to Leave voting areas in the north to try and shore up support. The Conservatives will double-down on their central message of 'Get Brexit Done', and we expect to see a great deal of Boris Johnson in the north during the rest of the campaign.

Either way, it's still all to play for, so expect to see a ramping up of both main parties campaigning in the key battlegrounds in the north over the remainder of the campaign, with plenty of frontbench visits to the region's key seats. Spare a thought for the poor candidates, who often view such visits from their party's 'heavyweights' with less enthusiasm than the average voter. One candidate told Northern Agenda, "We keep getting offered visits from frontbenchers and so far, we've managed to put them all off. Most of them the public have never heard of, and the one's that they have heard of they don't like. Visits from the great and the good are a liability."

So, with a warning that these are only predictions from one poll by one polling company this is our round-up of what these results could mean in our regions.

Devolution manifestos

Both main party's election manifestos talked of their plans for local or regional devolution.

Labour's manifesto stated, "We reiterate our commitment to One Yorkshire, and will make directly elected mayors more accountable to local councillors and elected representatives.

We will re-establish regional Government Offices to make central government more attuned to our English regions, to support our regional investments, and to enable the shift of political power away from Westminster."

Meanwhile, the **Conservative manifesto** promised, "We remain committed to devolving power to people and places across the UK.

Our ambition is for full devolution across England, building on the successful devolution of powers to city region mayors, Police and Crime Commissioners and others, so that every part of our country has the power to shape its own destiny. We will publish an English Devolution White Paper setting out our plans next year."

