

Sittingbourne Focus Group Headline Findings

Background

Public First conducted a focus group with 10 working-class voters in the Tudor Rose pub in Sittingbourne. All participants resided in Sittingbourne and Sheppey Constituency, or the neighbouring constituencies in Chatham and Aylesford, Gillingham and Rainham or Rochester and Strood. These constituencies all swung from Conservative in 2019 to Labour in 2024, and saw Reform securing a high share of the vote in third.

All participants were working-class, voted Conservative in 2019 and switched to Labour in 2024. They did not rule out voting for - and were therefore open to voting for - at least two of the following parties at the next election: Labour, Conservative, or Reform. Five participants were male and five were female, with ages ranging from 31 to 72.

Headline Findings

- **There was an overwhelming sense of disappointment with the new Government.** As soon as the Government was mentioned, multiple members of the group reacted angrily, with one woman immediately doing a thumbs down motion. For this group of people who switched from the Tories at the last election - which multiple people explained was a very difficult choice - they felt that Labour had not done enough to justify their vote. Instead, what they had seen - cuts to winter fuel allowance, allegations of sleaze and no progress on immigration - had left them very angry. However, despite this strength of feeling towards what they had seen so far, the majority of the group reluctantly reflected that they were still willing to give Labour a chance to see how they performed and wanted to see how it *"all panned out"*.
- **They struggled to see themselves ever going back to the Tories, and the leadership race was passing them by.** Not one participant indicated that they would consider voting for the Conservatives in the next General Election when asked. They had little interest in the Conservative leadership race, and had seen almost nothing except for Badenoch's comments on maternity pay and minimum wages, which were met with strong disapproval. Even the voters who were considering voting for Reform, were unimpressed by the little they had seen from Robert Jenrick and Kemi Badenoch. One man highlighted how the moderate candidate *"Tom Cleverly"* (confusing James Cleverly and Tom Tugendhat) seemed *"semi-normal"*, whereas the other two just seem *"crazy"*.
- **The group was split on whether Reform was a credible alternative, even if they felt strongly about immigration.** Around half of the group suggested that they would not

vote for Farage and Reform, despite wanting the government to take a stronger stance on illegal immigration. Some voters praised Nigel Farage *"He talks a lot of common sense"*, and one woman said she would now definitely be voting Reform because of Labour's failure to deal with immigration. For others there was a sense, even among these voters who viewed immigration as a major problem, that Reform was a less respectable choice, with a *"lack of substance across other policy areas"*. As one participant suggested *"they [Reform] don't seem solid enough for me"*.

- **Immigration was consistently raised as the country's biggest issue.** Participants talked of problems with the NHS, housing and schools, but immigration - and the lack of action taken by the Government - was still the most front of mind issue for the majority of the group. They repeatedly referenced the housing of asylum seekers in hotels as indicative of wider failings in the immigration system. This collective mood was demonstrated when one participant, to the nodding agreement of the rest of the group, explained that Starmer had *"talked about it, but had done nothing"* on immigration. When it came to action that the Government had taken, winter fuel allowance cuts drew a visceral negative reaction. There was a belief particularly among the older participants that Labour had actively chosen to *"victimise older people"*.
- **There was a strong sense of hopelessness around the public finances and the upcoming Budget.** The group, who were collectively downbeat about the prospect of the Budget, called for significant public investment and spending on public services. One participant summed up a sentiment shared by many in the group, *"You vote in a Labour government because they are going to come and spend and the country is just lacking enormously in investment"*. However, when the conversation shifted to potential tax rises in the Budget, voters were overwhelmingly opposed to any increases and did not differentiate between different forms of tax rises. They viewed increases in capital gains tax, employers' national insurance, and inheritance tax as direct threats to their personal finances. Participants accepted that the Conservatives had left a difficult economic inheritance, but were suspicious about potential Labour tax rises, as one man complained *"Labour said that in the past [ruled out tax raises], and put tax up anyway. We all know they are going to put tax up"*.
- **Starmer himself was deeply unpopular.** For this working-class group, the Labour Party leadership felt out of touch with ordinary voters, and no longer served *"the interest of the working-class"* who they should represent. Starmer himself received significant personal criticism, with participants labelling him *"evasive"*, *"woolly"* and one remarking *"he is just a very typical politician... I just don't find him interesting"*. Starmer's knighthood was brought up as evidence for how he is out-of-touch with ordinary voters. As one participant explained, although he knew *"how Starmer got the knighthood and appreciated that"*, Starmer's knighthood still made him seem like a member of the elite. When asked about the sleaze allegations, the free football and Taylor Swift tickets, along with donations from Lord Ali, were widely recognized, with one participant quickly responding *"Well, he took the bribe, didn't he"*. The group, deeply disillusioned by repeated Conservative

scandals, felt betrayed by Starmer's promises to restore integrity, with one voter lamenting *"You just think, surely he [Starmer] should have known better. I would have expected him to do better"*.

- **There was strong disillusionment with the British political system in general.** One man, who explained he was so depressed by politics that he may not vote again, described switching from Tories to Labour as *"jumping out of the frying pan into the fire"*. This sentiment was shared by others who described having voted Labour because they were driven by a desire to remove the Conservatives rather than enthusiasm around Labour itself. This tied into a wider and very strongly felt disenchantment with Westminster politics. There was a unanimously held view that all successful politicians are corrupt, as one participant complained *"you have to be crooked and do deals"* to succeed. While there was also anger at the choice presented by the two-party system *"I'm just so disillusioned with them all", "I don't trust any of them"*.