

Chapter 1

Three days in February

At nearly three o'clock in the morning on Friday 13 December 2019, the General Election results for the constituency of Luton South were declared. Gavin Shuker, who had been the local MP since 2010, had lost his seat, winning just 3,893 votes. It was a huge fall from the 28,000 votes he had received in the 2017 General Election. Shuker was still the same constituency MP he had been since 2010, working assiduously for the people of Luton South. But he had changed his party identity. First elected to parliament as a Labour MP, he had left the party earlier that year, forming a new independent grouping with ten other MPs in the Commons which would later become a fully fledged political party, Change UK. Shuker left Change UK, along with several of his colleagues, in the summer of 2019 and stood as an independent in the General Election which followed. Just five minutes after the results of Luton South were announced, Shuker's former Change UK colleague Chris Leslie would also lose his seat in Nottingham East. They would be followed over the

next couple of hours by Anna Soubry, Angela Smith, Sarah Wollaston, Chuka Umunna, Mike Gapes and Luciana Berger – all former Conservative and Labour MPs who were now standing under a different banner. Just a few days later Change UK was disbanded, with its leader Anna Soubry explaining that their lack of a parliamentary voice had forced them to ‘take stock’.¹ This marked the end of a turbulent journey for the party’s former MPs, who had battled to create and maintain a small political party in a majoritarian political system. The party’s impact on the political landscape may have been minor, but its story provides an excellent case study of the electoral and parliamentary difficulties facing small political parties in contemporary British politics.

To understand the story of Change UK and the challenge for small parties more widely we must go back to the morning of Monday 18 February 2019. It was the start of a normal week in contemporary British politics. Edging ever closer to a no-deal Brexit, Prime Minister Theresa May was fighting a continuing struggle with the House of Commons on the one hand, and the European Union – on the other, as she sought to pass her Brexit deal through parliament. For several months, parliament and government had been engaged in something of a battle of brinkmanship as MPs tried desperately to regain control of a Brexit which many felt was too harsh, while the Prime Minister tried almost as vigorously to resist attempts to undermine her position and a negotiated deal of which she was overtly proud. All of this was being played out predominantly in the House

of Commons chamber, through debates which stretched out into the late evening and seemingly endless rounds of voting on amendments, motions and amendments to motions. MPs were growing increasingly weary of traipsing through the division lobbies and of sitting through debates in which no new avenues were being explored, but things showed no sign of being resolved any time soon.

The setting for this particular Monday, though, would be very different and, for journalists who had spent weeks watching the green benches of the House of Commons chamber for the first flicker of movement on Brexit, it was probably a welcome relief. The announcement of a press conference just down the river, a few minutes from parliament, had started the rumour mill churning in earnest. It had been something of an open secret in the Palace of Westminster that a group of MPs had been planning on leaving the Labour Party, but it was unclear which MPs were involved and whether we were about to witness statements by a few disgruntled Labour backbenchers or the birth of a new political party. With a complete lack of information on any of the finer details, a sense of anticipation was building among the crowd of journalists who were waiting in the conference room. Those assisting with the press conference had worried that attendance would be poor, reducing the size of the room to prevent any empty chairs. They needn't have worried. The press in attendance began to feed everything they could see onto social media; most notably the presence of seven chairs and a stool on the stage. A covered sign was on the centre of the

podium, underneath which the word 'independent' could just about be read. Shortly after 11 a.m. seven Labour MPs – Luciana Berger, Ann Coffey, Mike Gapes, Chris Leslie, Gavin Shuker, Angela Smith and Chuka Umunna – walked into the room to begin their press conference. They had rehearsed this scene to ensure that nothing would go wrong.² Though Chuka Umunna was widely seen as the leader of this splinter group, it was Liverpool Wavertree MP Luciana Berger who first took to the podium. She announced the resignation of all seven MPs from the Labour Party in what was a 'painful' but necessary decision.

As each MP came to the podium in turn they provided their own personalised take on why Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party could no longer be their political and parliamentary home. Berger, Coffey and Gapes would cite their belief that the Labour Party was 'institutionally anti-semitic'. Chris Leslie described how the party had been 'hijacked by the machine politics of the hard left', something which was echoed by Angela Smith. One of these MPs explained to me that his departure had been a long time coming; he had known within a day of Commons business after the 2017 General Election that he would not be a Labour MP by the end of that parliament.³ The question had not been 'if' he should leave the party, but 'when'. It was clear that each MP had their own individual reasons for coming to this decision, but what bound them all together was the shared belief that the Labour Party had changed beyond recognition and was no longer the party which they had previously supported, joined, campaigned for and ultimately been

elected under. Their reasons for leaving went even further than this, though. Umunna's broad contention that 'politics is broken' set the tone for the press conference and in many ways summed up the general political and parliamentary mood. In interviews and statements released over the next few days, the MPs went on to express a feeling of frustration not just with the Labour Party and its leadership, but also with traditional party politics, as they did so pressing for some kind of alternative. Just what that alternative was, however, was not yet clear.

The former Labour MPs were casting aside their party label, but what were they to become? A company called Gemini A Ltd had been established the previous month with Gavin Shuker as its director. Berger announced that they would sit in the Commons as a grouping called The Independent Group. We must make an important distinction here about what this title means. When MPs leave the political party from which they were elected to parliament there are really only two options available. They can leave one party to join another, in what is known in parliamentary terminology as 'crossing the floor', or they may leave a party and continue to sit in the Commons as an 'independent' MP. The term 'crossing the floor' harks back to a time when there were only two dominant political forces in the political system. To leave one party and join another would mean physically walking from one side of the House of Commons chamber to the other. One would leave the party of government and join the party of opposition, or vice versa. In the context of an increasingly

multi-party system, an array of parties now exist for an MP to move to. Some, like Shaun Woodward in 1999, have moved from the Conservative Party to the Labour Party and gone on to serve in ministerial office. Others, such as Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless in 2014, have left a party of government to join a very small party. Carswell called a by-election in his constituency of Clacton, standing as a UK Independence Party (UKIP) candidate and being returned triumphantly with almost 60 per cent of the vote; the biggest by-election success in history. The first UKIP MP to sit in the House of Commons, he was joined the following month by former Conservative Party colleague Mark Reckless, who had similarly resigned his seat, being returned as a UKIP MP following another successful by-election in Rochester and Strood.

The 'independent' label is given to all MPs who are not aligned to an established political party. Independent MPs in the Commons are not a formal grouping. They have no leadership, do not necessarily share ideological outlooks and do not sit or vote together as a coherent and organised entity. Their paths to becoming an independent MP are notably diverse. Until the February 2019 press conference, most MPs sitting as independents in recent parliaments had left their parties not for principled ideological or political reasons, but because of personal misconduct. Indeed, of the 18 instances of MPs leaving a political party to serve as an independent from the start of the 2015 Parliament to January 2019, 14 had done so for alleged or proven cases of misconduct. This included allegations of sexual impropriety, financial

or expenses fraud, racist or sexist remarks and, in the case of former Labour MP Fiona Onasanya, a criminal conviction.⁴

If an MP has been forcibly removed from the party rather than leaving voluntarily, they may choose to designate themselves as an Independent Labour or Independent Conservative MP, indicating that their political beliefs continue to align with their former party. We saw this in 1994 when a group of ten Conservative MPs lost the party whip for failing to support John Major's Government in a confidence motion. These MPs are often allowed back into the fold. Ann Winterton, for instance, served a short stint as an Independent Conservative MP in 2004 following offensive remarks made while serving as a Shadow minister, but was allowed to re-join the party and its parliamentary group when she apologised just a few weeks later. In the 2017 Parliament, independent MPs leaving their party for reasons other than misconduct included Frank Field – who decided not to continue as a Labour MP in August 2018, citing a 'culture of nastiness' in the party – and Stephen Lloyd, who left the Liberal Democrats in December 2018 in order to give himself the freedom to go against his party's line on Brexit and vote in favour of the Prime Minister's Brexit deal. The February 2019 announcement by the seven Labour MPs was something different. Although clear that they were not (yet) establishing a new political party, they intended to work together as a formal 'group' of independents. Those involved with the planning had anticipated that the group would spend time in this non-party mode while

they prepared the foundations and infrastructure required for the launch of a fully fledged political party. While parliament itself would designate them only as independent MPs on its official record (alongside the collection of nine existing independent MPs referred to above), they would create a more formal structure of cooperation and organisation between themselves from the very start. In the early days this meant a very basic group website, streamlined personal websites bearing the group name, regular appearances as the 'magnificent seven', as they were styled by the press, and the use of the WhatsApp messaging system to communicate and ensure some semblance of cohesion within parliament.

At first sight the chances of success for the group may have seemed low. Berger highlighted at their first press conference how very different they all were in terms of constituency, age and experience in both the Labour Party and in the Commons. Ann Coffey had been a member of the party for 41 years while others like Berger and Umunna were relative newcomers, serving in the Commons only since 2010. All were MPs for English constituencies, but their constituencies stretched from Liverpool (Berger), Stockport (Coffey) and Penistone and Stocksbridge (Smith) in the north, to Umunna's Streatham and Gapes' Ilford constituencies in the south. Most held very safe Labour seats, winning their seats in the 2017 General Election with over 60 per cent of the vote. Luciana Berger was the most impressive in this respect. She had won Liverpool Wavertree with a massive 79 per cent of the vote; Chuka Umunna was not far behind, holding his Streatham

seat with just over 68 per cent. Angela Smith was the most vulnerable in these terms. Although she won her seat on 45.8 per cent of the vote, her Conservative rival had been only 1,300 votes behind. They also spanned several generations. At 72, Ann Coffey was almost twice the age of Luciana Berger and Gavin Shuker, both of whom were 37 when they left the party. Coffey had served as a Shadow minister at a time when Shuker and Berger were still in secondary school. If they were a diverse mix of MPs they at least had their former party affiliation in common.

The disparate nature of The Independent Group would increase even more over the next couple of days. On the afternoon of Tuesday 19 February Joan Ryan, long-standing Labour MP for Enfield North and former government minister under Tony Blair, announced that she too would be leaving the party and joining The Independent Group. Her announcement was a 'complete surprise'.⁵ There was speculation that three Conservative MPs – Heidi Allen, Anna Soubry and Sarah Wollaston – had gone underground and were not responding to messages from their party whips. Heidi Allen had a reputation within Westminster for being a forceful campaigner but was relatively unknown outside the Commons. Anna Soubry and Sarah Wollaston had a bigger public profile; the former was a former government minister and vocal critic of Theresa May during Brexit negotiations; the latter was a regular party rebel and chair of both the Health Select Committee and the formidable Liaison Committee, the group of committee chairs who, among other things, quiz the prime minister

on a bi-annual basis. The following afternoon, at another press conference, in the Institute for Engineers just a few hundred yards from the Palace of Westminster, the self-styled 'Three Amigos' similarly announced their resignation from the Conservative Party, pledging their allegiance to The Independent Group.

The atmosphere was immensely positive, one conference attendee describing very vividly the 'feel-good' sense in the air.⁶ Sitting on the front row to support the Amigos were their eight new colleagues. Their motivations for leaving their party mirrored many of those expressed by the Labour MPs. They spoke of being unhappy with the Conservative Party leadership and the way in which the more hard-line Eurosceptic European Research Group, chaired by Jacob Rees Mogg had been allowed to dominate the party and to determine party policy almost unilaterally. Heidi Allen would go on to tell BBC's *Newsnight* that she and her colleagues had been 'clinging to each other on a shipwreck'.⁷ The three women had been in conversation with a small group of Labour MPs led by Chris Leslie and Chuka Umunna since the previous autumn but discussions about creating a new centre-ground party were carried out with a high degree of secrecy. Such was the paranoia about information being leaked to the press too early that Allen, Soubry and Wollaston were not aware of precisely how many Labour MPs would be leaving the party or of who these MPs were until the morning of the press conference.⁸

Nevertheless, what had first started as internal divisions within the Labour Party had now become a much

bigger cross-party movement, setting the group apart from the Social Democratic Party (SDP) breakaway of the 1980s. They welcomed parallels made to the SDP and commentary on how this breakaway would be different resonated strongly among them. It was a 'lightning in a bottle Parliament';⁹ no one could remember a time when the two major parties had been so disunited. The combination of the government's minority status in the Commons and the Brexit logjam made for a more extreme political pressure cooker than that seen in the 1980s and gave them hope that the potential for a major political realignment was stronger than that which many had hoped for following the formation of the SDP.

At first glance there should have been nothing binding this group of 11 MPs together, apart from perhaps that they were simply a bunch of party misfits; MPs who had fallen out of love with their party leaders, policies and actions and could no longer stand under their party label. But one common thread running through the whole group was the frustration all had expressed with their own parties over Europe – or 'this whole Brexit thing', to use the words of Anna Soubry. All of the group identified themselves as remainers and five of them appeared in Politico's list of the top 40 'Brexit Troublemakers'.¹⁰ Chris Leslie, coming in at 27th on the list, had been a vociferous parliamentary critic of both Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn's Brexit positions and described Corbyn's refusal to commit the party to a second referendum or 'People's Vote' as agreed at its annual conference as a 'betrayal'. As the Commons debated government legislation to facilitate Brexit under

Theresa May's premiership, he had been personally responsible for the tabling of hundreds of amendments designed to clarify the government's intentions and to push to keep the UK in a customs union. As part of the cross-party People's Vote campaign, Chuka Umunna (seventh on the list) had been a regular feature in the media as one of the most visible faces of the campaign. Alongside Gavin Shuker and other Labour MPs, he had been in contact with the Prime Minister in January 2019 to offer parliamentary support for the Brexit deal on the proviso that it was put before the British public in a referendum as well.

The new independents were deeply frustrated with their own party leaders' stances on Brexit and the way in which legislation was being facilitated by them. But it was about more than just Westminster; it was also about constituency representation. One of the former Conservative MPs described how the combination of Brexit and the disastrous implementation of the Universal Credit had made her embarrassed to be the MP in her constituency; so much so that she 'couldn't wait to get out'.¹¹ Many of The Independent Group MPs would be labelled by the press at some point as 'rebels' following their resignations. But this terminology is confusing and presents something of a misunderstanding of the position and role of the group. In a political setting, to be a rebel suggests that you are going against the ideological outlook or path set by your party. The Labour MPs were clear that they were fighting for a Brexit position which had been decided by party members. If they were rebelling, then this was a rebellion against

the party leader, Jeremy Corbyn, for apparently ignoring the wishes of grassroots members by not endorsing a second Brexit referendum. In a parliamentary context a rebel is someone who votes the wrong way – against the wishes of their party leader. Some of the MPs in the group certainly had form for frustrating their party whips. Sarah Wollaston, for example, brought a rather independent mindset with her from the moment she entered the Commons. Just a few months into her tenure as an MP she heavily criticised the content of her own government's Health and Social Care Bill and was blocked from taking part in the detailed committee scrutiny of the bill by the party whips who objected to her actions. Speaking in the chamber shortly afterwards, she stated that she profoundly objected to the notion that she should 'always vote with the government'.¹² Rebellion was something that this MP had always been prepared to do, though it should be noted that throughout the Brexit process the number of occasions on which she voted against the majority of her party increased. Others in the group, including Umunna, Berger and Shuker, had a very low rate of formal rebellion in Commons votes.

Both Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn would be forced to implement an immediate containment strategy to try to prevent the further enlargement of The Independent Group. Shadow Labour ministers were sent out to denounce the MPs concerned – and to stress that they would be unable to hold their constituencies as independent MPs come election time. Emily Thornberry told a Labour supporters' rally that they would be 'crushed'

in an election: a somewhat bizarre claim given that during the same week a YouGov poll showed that 14 per cent of the British public would vote for The Independent Group if it fielded candidates at a general election. Not bad for a political organisation which was only a few days old, and twice as high as the support being expressed at the time for the Liberal Democrats. Labour deputy leader Tom Watson launched the Future Britain Group in the committee rooms of the Commons in early March 2019, an understandable attempt to bring MPs from a more mainstream Labour background together into an organised group with the promise of influence on the policy and direction of the party. Meanwhile the Prime Minister, sensing the common Brexit anger among those who had left the Conservative Party – and the continued frustrations of many MPs still within it – offered MPs the opportunity to have a vote on delaying the date by which the UK was to leave the European Union as set out in Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty if the Commons rejected her final deal which was to be put before the House the following month. The Liberal Democrats had a tough call to make: should they provide the new group with a friendly welcome or keep them at arm's length for fear of being subsumed by them? In the end they chose the first option, with party leader Vince Cable proposing to work with them to pursue shared Brexit priorities in the Commons and suggesting that an electoral pact, an agreement whereby the two parties would not stand candidates against each other in constituencies at election time, was inevitable.

As the reverberations of the breakaway were being felt across the two main parties, The Independent Group held its first formal meeting in a small committee room in the House of Commons (the standard venue for meetings of political party groups) on the following Monday (25 February), before taking part in the first real votes in the Commons since their departure. Following the meeting, pictures emerged of the entire group enjoying a meal at Nando's. Things may have been looking relatively rosy for the group over those initial few days, but it was clear that they were in the extremely early stages of party formation. Unbeknown to some, behind the scenes, tensions were already emerging around the speed at which the group should progress in its ambitions to become a political party.

Given the centrality of political parties to contemporary British political and parliamentary life, some of the group wanted to acquire formal party status as soon as possible. The overwhelming majority of candidates at British general elections stand under a party label (just 187 independents stood in the 2017 General Election). After the election they are the means by which the government and opposition are formed. Discussion of the UK's political system within political science is also dominated by references to its majoritarian nature. Indeed, it is seen as the archetypal model of a system which sits in contrast to the more consensual political and parliamentary styles of most other European countries. At Westminster this majoritarianism is characterised by the dominance of the two main political parties – the Labour Party and the Conservative Party

– and by the adversarial nature of parliamentary politics. The binary division inherent in the system, in which an elected government is opposed by an ‘Official Opposition’, predisposes it to revolve overwhelmingly around two main parties. Both have very well-developed mechanisms for organisation and communication, with a system of party whips and weekly meetings to discuss and manage parliamentary and party business. The dominance of the two main parties is deeply embedded throughout the House of Commons (in the Lords the presence of a sizeable number of crossbench peers with no party affiliation makes this slightly different) and it has long posed a challenge for all smaller parties who sit alongside them.

We can see these challenges in the architecture and layout of the House of Commons chamber, which seems to have been designed with only two political parties in mind. The governing party sit on the green benches to the Speaker’s right and face the opposition parties, who sit on the green benches to the Speaker’s left. On the Table of the House (right in front of the Speaker’s Chair) are two wooden despatch boxes with microphones. Government ministers and Shadow ministers from the largest opposition party use these boxes to give speeches and to make or respond to statements and questions. Their frontbench colleagues sit alongside them on the first green bench. We are used to seeing opposition leaders leaning on the despatch box as they tear into the prime minister at the weekly jousting tournament of Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs). This image of the two-party system is most commonly presented on

national news and current affairs programmes and is the image of parliament which the majority of the general public will be familiar with. It is embedded in our political psyche.

Smaller political parties are not well accommodated within the chamber. They sit on the green benches far away from the Speaker's Chair, towards the bar of the House. Since the late 1990s the third largest party (the Liberal Democrats until 2010 and the SNP from 2015) has occupied some of the front bench in this section of the chamber, as well as the first couple of rows behind. Further behind them sit all of the other small parties whose MPs have been elected to the Commons. These MPs find themselves squashed into just two or three benches in perhaps the most remote corner of the chamber. They can easily find themselves pushed out of the centre stage. Their party leaders must speak from their seats rather than from the despatch boxes and they can find themselves virtually cropped out of any photographs or video clips of the Commons. Look at any picture of the Commons chamber printed in newspapers, magazines or online and you will most likely see the two main parties, perhaps with the occasional third-party MP sneaking in at the edges. If you go along to parliament as a visitor and sit in the House of Commons public gallery (as anyone is able to do), you will find yourself sitting above the smaller party benches. The public gallery is sizeable and offers a fantastic view of the chamber. But this view is primarily of the government and the official opposition. While some smaller party MPs can be seen, others will be

hidden from view. You can always hear them, thanks to the microphones dotted around the chamber, but you can't always see them speaking. Those watching will need to view their speech on the screens in the gallery area. The struggle for visibility is a very real challenge for them.

It is a challenge that many are willing to face. At The Independent Group's press conference on 20 February Heidi Allen explained that the group were putting their heads 'above the parapet' and that they 'might fail'. But she asked the journalists assembled in the room: 'isn't the prize worth fighting for?'. Many other parties will have asked themselves the same question as they arrived in the House of Commons for the first time. For although we tend to think of British politics as being a two- (or two-and-a-half-) party system, the reality is that the Commons has long been home to small opposition parties. The 2017 Parliament was composed of a total of eight political parties, with the SNP, The Independent Group, the Liberal Democrats, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), Plaid Cymru and the Green Party sitting alongside the two main parties. Sinn Féin also has elected MPs, although the party abstains from taking its seats in the Commons and so plays no substantive part in Commons life. In the 2015–17 Parliament the number of parties with parliamentary representation stood at 11, with UKIP, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) and the Ulster Unionist Party also holding seats in the chamber. Some of these parties have a relatively short history of representation in the Commons. The Green Party elected

its first (and only) MP, Caroline Lucas, in 2010, while UKIP held elected MPs between 2014 and 2017 only. Others have had a more long-standing presence. The SNP first won a Commons seat briefly in 1945, but has maintained a permanent Commons presence since 1967 when Winnie Ewing won a by-election in Hamilton, taking the seat from Labour on a swing of 38 per cent. Some of the most pivotal moments in UK parliamentary and constitutional history have involved small parliamentary parties. Take, for example, the role of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the collapse of the Gladstone Government in 1885, or the demands extracted from the Liberal Government for their legislative support for Lloyd George's 'People's Budget' of 1909, culminating in the 1911 Parliament Act. The coalition government of 2010–15 formed because of the pivotal role played by the 57-strong group of Liberal Democrat MPs under the leadership of Nick Clegg. Small party presence is by no means a new phenomenon at Westminster and is increasingly becoming the norm, but we rarely hear about these MPs in discussions of current affairs.

For most small parties, gaining their first parliamentary seat comes after not one, but many, long slogs on the campaign trail. The much-criticised first-past-the-post electoral system used for UK parliamentary elections is far kinder to the larger, more established political parties and thus it may take several electoral cycles for their smaller counterparts finally to see some tangible successes. It forces emerging parties to concentrate their campaign resources on just a few key constituencies to maximise their chances of winning. This can mean

that while they are trying to appeal to the whole electorate, in reality their success can hinge on just a few thousand people living in one constituency. The Greens had contested Brighton Pavilion at every general election since 1992 before Caroline Lucas swept to victory in 2010. Even when parties are successful, their prize is often much smaller than their share of the vote would suggest. Although UKIP gained its first seat in the Commons as the result of a defection by Douglas Carswell, the party's performance in the 2015 General Election saw them push the Liberal Democrats out of third place, winning over 12 per cent of the national vote. This support was spread too thinly across constituencies, though, and as a result, the party won only one parliamentary seat, in Carswell's constituency of Clacton. Even the then party leader and by far the most recognisable UKIP face, Nigel Farage, failed to win his South Thanet seat, falling over 2,000 votes short of the Conservative Party's Craig Mackinlay. Occasionally the first-past-the-post electoral system can have the reverse effect. The SNP benefits from being a nationalist party and having its support concentrated in Scotland. The 50 per cent of the Scottish vote it received in the 2015 General Election gained the party 56 of the 650 seats in the Commons. This translated into less than 5 per cent of the overall UK vote, causing consternation from some about the legitimacy of its parliamentary weight. The Liberal Democrats held a higher percentage of the UK wide vote (just under 8 per cent), yet found themselves pushed out of the third-party position because they had won far fewer parliamentary seats. Electoral

and parliamentary arithmetic do not always match up. This was the reason why Tony Blair could govern with such large majorities; the larger parties never complain when the system benefits them. It can be frustrating for smaller parties and their MPs when their electoral efforts do not appear to have been rewarded.

For The Independent Group, things were slightly different. Formed solely from MP defections and with no immediate elections to contest, the new group avoided having to undergo any immediate battles with the electoral system, launching themselves in the Commons as the fourth largest party, a title held jointly with the Liberal Democrats thanks to Lib Dem MP Stephen Lloyd's departure from the party in December 2018. The nature of The Independent Group's formation once again led to comparisons with the formation of the SDP in 1981. This too had been led by defectors from the Labour Party, including two sitting Labour MPs (David Owen and Bill Rodgers) who would later be followed by 26 more Labour MPs plus one solitary Conservative. Although two of the SDP's founders (Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins) would later sit on the green benches thanks to successful by-election contests, the SDP also reached the position of third largest parliamentary party without having to contest a single parliamentary seat under their new party banner. As we will see, the electoral system is one challenge; carving out a position in the Commons and overcoming parliamentary obstacles is quite another.

While they negated the usual requirement of a strong general election performance to propel them onto the

green benches of the Commons, The Independent Group would very soon take the decision to contest an election. EU elections were looming and the group had to make a decision about whether or not to field candidates. In order to do so they would need to apply for official party status with the Electoral Commission. It was a long process, taking up a great deal of time for the few administrative staff that the group had. The application was made in March and in April the group rebranded themselves as Change UK – The Independent Group. The creation of a new political party was a ‘potential consequence’ of leaving the two main parties, but for most of the group it was not the primary goal.¹³ Nevertheless, Change UK launched its campaign for the European parliamentary elections in the remain-dominated city of Bristol. Here, the Change UK MPs spoke of an influx of 3,700 applications from across the UK to stand as candidates in the forthcoming election.¹⁴ Those who made the final cut included some prominent figures – journalists Gavin Esler and Rachel Johnson (sister of Boris Johnson) and former Labour and Conservative MPs (Neil Carmichael and Roger Casale).

Although the results of the election were disappointing for the new party, winning just 3.4 per cent of the overall UK vote and failing to secure a single MEP, its founders initially put a brave face on the outcome, hailing it a success given the time constraints since the party’s formation. The failure was a stark contrast to the success enjoyed by another fledgling political party. Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party, which had been formally registered only a couple of weeks prior to The Independent Group’s

formation, managed to elect 29 MEPs with a total of 31 per cent of the vote. This was over twice as many seats as the two main parties combined and dwarfed their combined total of 23 per cent of the vote. As a high-profile political figure with strong financial backing, Farage had not struggled to gain media attention for his party, or to put forward candidates to stand for election. The contrast between the two parties was clear; Change UK had been built almost completely from scratch, with few resources and a set of faces with which the general public were less than familiar.

The performance of Change UK in the European elections served only to fuel the divisions within the group about its direction of growth. On Tuesday 4 June, following what the press described as an 'amicable' meeting, six Change UK MPs (Heidi Allen, Luciana Berger, Gavin Shuker, Angela Smith, Chuka Umunna and Sarah Wollaston) announced that they were leaving the party, returning to the Commons as independents who would work together on a group basis, similar to what they had initially planned to do as The Independent Group. Umunna would later announce that he was joining the Liberal Democrats. The five remaining Change UK MPs elected Anna Soubry as their new leader. In a statement, she announced that the party was 'as determined to fix Britain's broken politics as we were when we left our former parties' and that they would be undergoing a process of policy development over the summer.¹⁵ Days later the remaining Change UK MPs announced that they were applying to change their party's name once more – this time because of

legal action threatened by Change.org – to become The Independent Group for Change.¹⁶ When the House of Commons approved the Early Parliamentary General Election Act at the end of October 2019, the party saw further internal disruption. Joan Ryan had already announced that she would be standing down from parliament at the next election, leaving only Gapes, Leslie and Soubry standing under The Independent Group for Change banner. All three would lose their seats to candidates from the larger parties; in each case they lost to the party which they themselves had represented until the previous year. Chris Leslie summed up the general mood of the party when he said that it was ‘never realistically about standing to win’.¹⁷ The three MPs had been under no illusion that they could compete with the larger party machines at election time. This had been a common theme for the party since its creation. Just a few months prior to the election Anna Soubry had called for a ‘cross-party summit’ of all of the small parties in the UK to ‘discuss the democratic crisis facing the country, and the need to break the cartel of the bigger established parties’.¹⁸

This call for small party action amid the dominance of the two big parties speaks exactly to the purpose of this book. The political environment of Westminster can be a hostile one for those who do not sit under a Labour or Conservative Party banner. The very design of the political system, with its majoritarian electoral system, often opaque parliamentary procedures, combined with the lack of press interest as well as broader resource and information deficits, mean that small parties have

to work exceedingly hard if they are to survive. It is to their credit that so many small parties strive to, and are successful in, achieving this – finding creative ways in which to make their mark on the landscape of the British parliamentary system. This book takes the rise and fall of The Independent Group (from here on referred to throughout as Change UK) as its starting point, but it explores the experiences of all small parties in the House of Commons, demonstrating the challenges facing them and the means by which they utilise their limited resources to be effective MPs and political parties.

Notes

- 1 BBC News, 'General Election 2019: Anna Soubry disbands Independent Group for Change', 19 December 2019. Online at: www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-50858811 [accessed 29 February 2020].
- 2 See N. Murphy, 'The Independent Group wasn't a failure – it was about putting country before party', *Huffington Post*, 18 February 2020.
- 3 Interview, Change UK MP, 4 June 2019.
- 4 Onasanya would later lose her Peterborough seat following a successful recall petition signed by her constituents. Labour's Lisa Forbes took the seat in June 2019, depriving the Brexit Party of their first Commons MP by less than 1,000 votes.
- 5 Interview, former Liberal Democrat MP, 30 January 2020.
- 6 Interview, former Liberal Democrat MP, 30 January 2020.
- 7 *Newsnight*, 20 February 2019.
- 8 Interview, former Liberal Democrat MP, 30 January 2020.
- 9 Interview, Change UK MP, 4 June 2019.
- 10 Those included in the rankings were: Chuka Umunna (7th), Anna Soubry (12th), Sarah Wollaston (17th), Heidi Allen (18th) and Chris Leslie (27th).
- 11 Interview, former Liberal Democrat MP, 30 January 2020.

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