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The UK's Conservative party is facing a grass roots problem

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A report into a scandal highlights a waning campaign base, writes Sebastian Payne



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Politics in Britain is booming. At grass roots level this has manifested itself most prominently in the opposition Labour party, where under Jeremy Corbyn [membership has increased to 515,000](#), more than all the other parties put together. It is a different story for the governing [Conservative party](#), however, which has a membership of about 150,000. Since Britain's referendum on EU membership there has been a rise but the party is keeping schtum about exactly how much.

One Conservative effort to address this imbalance was RoadTrip. This project, started by “Tatler Tory” Mark Clarke, gave the party exactly what was needed to win the 2015 general election: a gang of young, enthusiastic activists eager to hop on a coach to marginal constituencies and knock on doors, often in exchange for food and beer. He was duly welcomed into the heart of the party's campaigning machine.

But it ended tragically. The death of activist Elliott Johnson and the controversy around Mr Clarke's alleged behaviour brought an end to RoadTrip. As the [party's report into the scandal](#), released on Thursday, shows, some officials were aware of Mr Clarke's questionable characteristics but still allowed him and his organisation to play a vital part in the campaign.

The lack of grass roots Tories available to take to the doorsteps has made the party vulnerable to a character such as Mr Clarke. That is how desperate matters have become. One MP representing a solid Tory area claims to have seen 200 new members in his constituency since the referendum but admits that rebuilding the membership is "hard and important". Another minister describes the party's campaigning infrastructure as "on the precipice of disaster".

During last year's general election, Sir Lynton Crosby, who ran the Tory campaign, was appalled at the state of the party in safe seats, such as Iain Duncan Smith's Chingford and Woodford Green constituency in east London, and resorted to paying volunteers to campaign. This trick might work for photo calls but it will not change the fact that elections cannot be won purely on the airwaves. More recent proposals by [Andrew Feldman](#), former Conservative party chairman, to shake up party infrastructure are a clear indication of panic.

For the Tories, older members are dying off; meanwhile younger folk are not joining, partly because the party has struggled to espouse a cause they find sufficiently persuasive. This may change with Prime Minister Theresa May's more robust brand of conservatism but the situation may require a more radical rethink. Some in the party believe it needs a "momentum of the right", a reference to Mr Corbyn's activist group, for which the Vote Leave campaign could provide the basis.

The Tories are not naturally a party of grass roots activism. As [Abby Tomlinson](#), a Labour activist, recently wrote: "Do you know who have literally zero rallies? The Tories. Do you know who keep winning elections? Also the Tories." She is correct that the echo chamber of rallies does not help win elections but it signifies the party's strength. The fact that they face a weak opposition and have been in power for six years distracts from this pressing issue.