The Economist

The political landscape

UKIP gets serious

The populist right-wing party has learned a trick from the Liberal Democrats that could propel it to Westminster

Jan 18th 2014 | GREAT YARMOUTH | From the print edition

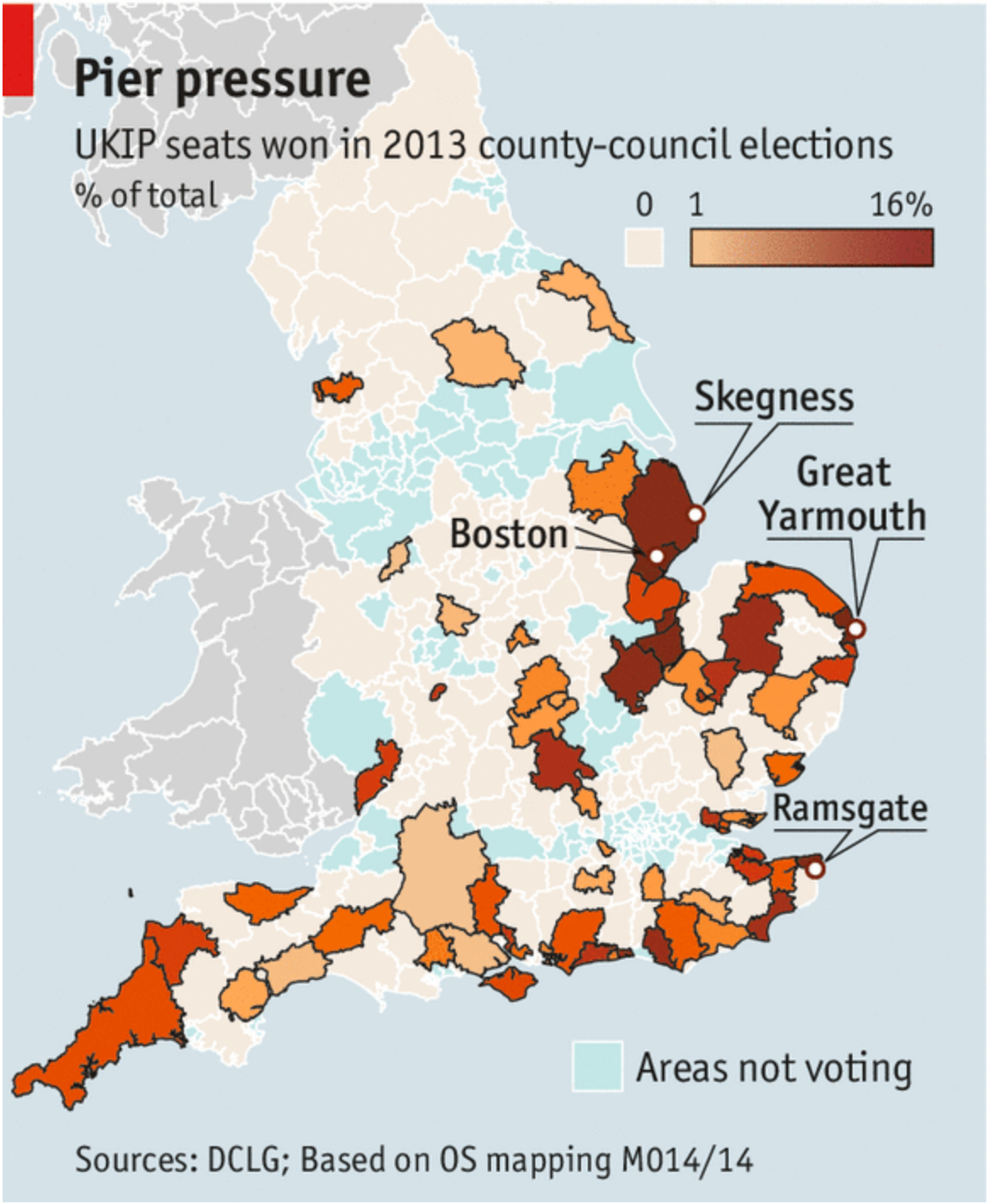
THE dilapidated seaside town of Great Yarmouth does not feel like the centre of anything. "We're literally at the end of the line," muses Peter Fitzgerald, referring to the single-track railway that runs across the surrounding marshes. But that is changing, thanks to people like Mr Fitzgerald. As well as running Great Yarmouth's army-surplus shop, he is an activist in the anti-EU, anti-immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP). There, and in other quiet coastal towns, Mr Fitzgerald and his like are moulding a lively but disorganised movement into a political machine.

UKIP is the most disruptive force in British politics—and, to Conservative MPs, the most terrifying. Though opinion polls put its support at just 13%, much lower than the Conservatives or Labour, it threatens to split the right-wing vote and keep the Tory Party out of power in 2015. Fear of defections has helped push Tory leaders into tough stances on immigration and Europe, and has hushed them on the topic of gay marriage (which they favour and UKIP opposes). MPs worry that the upstart party might come first in elections to the European Parliament, to be held in May. That would be a symbolic victory. But UKIP is aiming for something bigger.

Last May, in county elections, UKIP increased its tally of council seats in England from eight to 147 (see map). The party won five of Great Yarmouth's nine seats on Norfolk's county council. It also fared particularly well in other east-coast towns like Boston and Skegness —places with flat, vegetable-growing hinterlands worked by unloved east European

immigrants and lived in by the kind of nostalgic elderly voters that one party official calls "*poujadistes* in bungalows". This realm of faded tea rooms, big skies, beach huts and Polish supermarkets has become UKIP's political heartland.

On



May 22nd this year, the same day as the European elections, seats on borough councils and unitary authorities will be up for grabs, many of them in places where UKIP has excellent

prospects. The party hopes to win at least half of the seats on Great Yarmouth's town council, for example. Achieving that would be tough, says Matthew Smith, its parliamentary candidate in the area. But it would put Westminster within UKIP's reach.

Nearly one million Britons cast ballots for UKIP in the 2010 general election. Proportionately, those votes would have given the party 20 seats in Parliament. But they were too evenly spread: Britain's first-past-the-post system kept UKIP from winning a single one. If the party is to become more than a marginal spoiler of Conservative hopes, it needs to build strongholds in a few areas where it stands a decent chance of winning. The east coast is the party's biggest target.

With four months to go before the local elections, tables in Mr Smith's office in Great Yarmouth are piled with leaflets and voter data. Annotated maps line the walls. Mr Smith's nerdy interest in campaign techniques, statistics and the minutiae of local planning disputes makes him easy to mistake for a Liberal Democrat politician. Though UKIP is politically distant from that Europhile, socially liberal party, Mr Smith is proud of the comparison. The Lib Dems, he explains, developed a successful two-part formula for breaking into Parliament. First, get people elected to local government in heartland areas; second, concentrate resources.

Winning local council seats is a springboard to Westminster. It provides a party with campaigners, makes it more visible in an area and enables parliamentary candidates to understand local issues. Local victories also give UKIP the chance to show prospective supporters and donors that it can win elections. In Great Yarmouth—and nationally—the Tories insist that voting for UKIP splits the conservative vote, benefiting the Labour Party. Mr Smith retorts that, because UKIP came first in the town last year, it would be more accurate to label the Tories vote-splitters. He says local membership has grown from 20 to around 100—enough to mount a serious general-election campaign.

Normal for Norfolk

Following the Liberal Democrats' formula, the party is now concentrating its resources. UKIP has little money and only 12 full-time staff, so it cannot afford to spread them evenly. Places like Great Yarmouth come first. Alan Bown, a donor who sits on the party's executive, has paid for polling there and in six other promising constituencies, three of them on the east coast. Asked how they intended to vote in the general election, 30% said UKIP. The town has also received three campaign visits from Nigel Farage, UKIP's blokeish, telegenic leader. During one, he persuaded a man serving him in a local pub to become a candidate.

It may be winning local elections and smartly concentrating its firepower, but UKIP remains proudly amateurish. Unlike their Tory and Labour opponents, the party's candidates are, in effect, at liberty to say and do whatever it takes to get elected. Mr Smith, for example, did not like the leaflets sent by headquarters, so devised one himself. He also disavows his party's hostility to wind turbines (a rare source of good jobs in the area). This potent combination of regional strength and local autonomy could carry candidates like him all the way to Westminster.

But that raises the question: what will they do if elected? UKIP's bottom-up structure makes it perilously chaotic and ill-disciplined. Its ability to vet candidates is limited—Mr Farage's barside conversations notwithstanding—and some of the party's policies read as if they too were thrashed out in a pub. Getting to Parliament is one thing. Achieving some semblance of professionalism once there is another.

From the print edition: Britain