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Britain

Rishi Sunak – can he fix it for the Tories?

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Sunak has become the first Indian-heritage Prime Minister (PM). We cannot deny this represents a change from the 1960s, when leading Tory politician Enoch Powell made his viciously racist Rivers of Blood speech. Sunak was born in 1980, when there were no black or brown MPs, and there were no Tory BAME MPs in 2001. He is the youngest PM for 200 years and I have not found any yet in modern times with only 7 years of parliamentary experience before reaching the highest office.

At the same time, it shows how the closed English class system works because he made it to the top through the greased channels familiar to the native elite. He was sent by solid middle class parents to Winchester public school, where he became head boy. He studied Politics, Philosophy, and Economics and achieved a first at Oxford. Next, he took a business administration masters degree at Stanford in the USA. Sunak worked as an analyst at Goldman Sachs and became a partner at two hedge funds. He married the daughter of the billionaire founder of the Indian company Infosys. Sunak and his wife made it onto the Sunday Times rich list. He is the only politician on there. He will be the richest PM ever.

One word cloud based on public responses published recently had competence and intelligence highlighted, but the biggest word associated with Sunak by far was rich. During COVID, he won some popularity with the furlough scheme and the “eat out to help out” scheme, but he also shared in some of the same deadly errors that Johnson made. His cheap eating out wheeze increased the spread of COVID. Many millions of pounds were lost in the way the business grants system was managed, as fraudulent claims easily got through. He never raised objections to the Tory ‘mates’ queue for personal protection and other health provisions when shoddy, useless products made people very rich. Negative publicity around his partner’s non-dom status, his COVID fine, and his image as a rich toff living in a different world to most of us has already dented his image before his latest reincarnation as saviour of the economy.

A problem of legitimacy

Constitutionally, it is perfectly in order for a governing political party to change its leader and, therefore, the PM without calling a general election. People vote for a party and its manifesto, not for a particular leader. However, the 24/7 media coverage of politics today focuses on leaders and personalities, so most people do not really concern themselves with all the constitutional intricacies. They see 3 prime ministers in 6 months and 4 chancellors in 4 months, and they feel they have no say in the change of direction and focus that each has brought to the table. It also looks chaotic, incompetent, and provokes a sense of a crumbling regime. All of this is also happening in the middle of the worst cost of living crisis in fifty years. You can understand the mass resentment and bitterness, which is reflected in polls putting Labour over 50% and up to 30 percentage points ahead.

Even some Tory MPs, like Nadine Dorries and Christopher Chope, who are diehard Johnsonites, argued that since their hero did not compete in the ballot and he uniquely represented the mandate won in 2019, there should be a general election. Dorries suggested “all hell would break loose” if Sunak was crowned. She and others say that the parliamentary party shut down the voices of members who supported Johnson. Indeed, there is some truth in this accusation. The contest was organised in a way that was always going to favour Sunak. Currently, such minority views have been submerged in desperate cries for unity by MPs from all wings of the party. Sunak won easily, but that doesn’t hide the fact that his party base and network aren’t very strong. The pro-Johnson rump still holds him responsible for striking the first blow against their king. Johnson’s sigh that the ‘time is not right’ means he will still

possibly hover in the wings, causing trouble for Sunak.

Can Sunak maintain Tory party unity?

Matt Frei, on Channel 4, made a good point when he asked if it was a cabinet of all the talents or of all the factions. Sunak, unlike Johnson or Truss, hasn't built his own network or historical base within the party. He knows that the factional warfare between one nation Tories, the Spartan Brexiteers, the Johnsonites, and the Truss people will re-emerge once any fleeting honeymoon period is over. In the end, as Phil Hearse pointed out in a recent article on this site, the differences within the Tory party reflect the interests of different parts of the capitalist class. Sunak is closer to representing the interests of the transnational capitalist class. Brexit was never really something that the dominant sectors of British or international capital wanted. The problem is that its political interests have been traditionally organised in parliament by the Tory party, which is made up of representatives of the middle classes, small businesses, domestic capital, finance, and international capital. Once Cameron let the Brexit nightmare out of the bag, the party was utterly divided.

The new cabinet contains all the factions, although the Truss team is much less represented—11 of her cabinet members did not make the new one. The supposedly squeaky-clean Sunak was also not above honouring a deal with Suella Braverman in exchange for her support at a crucial time in the leadership campaign. He has signalled that, unlike Truss's recent line, he does not want to loosen the rules on migrant entry. The idea that he was less anti-woke and more socially liberal was shown to be false when he made Kemi Badenoch an equalities minister. She voted against same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland, banned gender neutral toilets and called trans women men. The new cabinet has less female representation (23%) than recent ones.

Everywhere he turns, he has issues that could set him against one or other of the factions. Rescuing Braverman rather than just renegeing on the deal could come back to bite him. Jake Berry, ex-minister and chair of the party, stated today that there was more than one data security breach from Braverman that broke the ministerial code. As one might expect, Starmer and the other opposition parties are focusing on this aspect of the situation rather than principled opposition to Rwanda's racist project.

Blocking welfare benefits from going up with inflation or dropping the triple lock could bring him up against the one nation people. Cutting back on the 3% defence budget target would mean a confrontation with Wallace. Any concessions to the EU on the Northern Ireland protocol would inflame Baker and his European Reform Group. Tory MPs have got used to voting against their government. The prospect of defeat in the next election will focus their minds, but they may also think in terms of "we're all going down anyway" and "I'm going to stick to my guns."

It would be a very difficult situation, even for somebody with more years of political experience. Sunak is not that honed in the fine arts of politics. His antics in the leadership campaign against Truss when he kept doubling down on various issues in order to win the membership did not look like someone who was a strong leader with his own vision and strategy. The boasting of diverting money from deprived areas to the home counties did not go down well with the Red Wall Tories. It looked inept.

Will there be a Sunak bounce?

Possibly there will be. In fact, Starmer has rather stupidly already suggested it will happen—why reinforce the message your opponents are pushing? The Conservatives and their media will talk up the fact that he is the first PM

with Indian roots and that he is only 42 years old. They hope this may play well among certain demographics. The Tory press has seamlessly and shamelessly changed tack several times in less than a week or so. From championing Truss's mini budget to then rubbishing it, and then relishing the triumphant return of Johnson from his Caribbean luxury resort to lionising Sunak as the new saviour. The fact that he called out the dangers of Trussonomics from the start will also make him look more competent and serious than her or even Johnson.

However there are the negatives:

- he is not a completely new face,
- his shared bungling of COVID,
- the non-dom tax status of his partner,
- his 'love of Britain that gave him so much is slightly undermined by his holding on to an American green card for so long,
- his rich toff otherness is highlighted rather than dimmed in his staged interaction with the public – the petrol station incident – he does not have the Johnson touch,
- his boasting about the way he was diverting government money going to deprived Labour areas won't help him in the red wall seats.

He is also facing a united call from all the other parties and public opinion for a general election. Labour looks a bit more vigorous and confident at the moment as its policies on several big issues are first rejected and then adopted by the Tories. The green energy public company and the windfall tax are popular.

What next?

Both the media and the government are framing the economic situation as 'how do we fill the financial black hole of 30 to 40 billion so that the markets are happy'. We explained in a recent article how the 'markets' and 'financial black holes' are political and ideological constructs. Different economic strategies can sustain bigger or smaller government borrowing. If borrowing for investment and sustainability is prioritised, then it can ease inflationary pressures. Bigger taxes can be imposed on the rich and corporations. These "holes" can change from one week to the next depending on the volatility of the markets. Postponing the financial statement to November 17, when it will become an autumn statement, is said to be already making the burden of borrowing £10 billion less as the worries about the Truss experiment fade from the memory of Britain's international creditors.

Sunak and Hunt have already stated that there will be eye-watering cuts to public spending. Today, the media is showing the NHS is on its knees with ambulances queuing to get a bed for patients and the crisis in the care system blocking elderly people getting out of hospital at the other end. Cuts will only exacerbate the cost-of-living crisis. It is possible that Sunak will consider new windfall taxes and make interventions to help the poorest of the poor. But overall, working people will be hit hard.

Public spending cuts are particularly difficult when the government is facing a full-blown strike wave in the public sector. How can it carry out 15% cuts across departments and also meet pay demands for inflation-proof pay rises? Sunak may think that a hard line against the unions, backed up with new anti-trade union laws guaranteeing minimum service levels, could win back support for the Tories. All the evidence up to now shows the strikers are winning majority support from the public. Taking on the unions and causing them to work together more could even make it impossible to run the country and force a general election.

The increasing call for a general election raises the stakes in a positive way for all the strikers. A link can be made

between the wage demands and a political solution to the crisis. People will see that if this government cannot meet the demands, then we need one that will. Usually, wage struggles do not take place in such a context.

Some people on the left are counterposing the need to build and support the strikes with the call for a general election now to kick out the Tories. They say that it undermines the struggle and breeds illusions in or reliance on Starmer's Labour. Some even say they would not vote for Labour against the Tories. We have responded in more detail to these ultra-left and sectarian arguments here. Workers understand there is a difference between Labour and the Tories, even if it is a case of "marginal gains" (to quote Dave Brailsford, the British cycling guru). Given the affiliation of unions to Labour, more pressure can potentially be exerted. Anyway, it is very difficult to have other options with our undemocratic first past the post system.

Our demands today

For the left, the most urgent demands for action now are:

- solidarity and support all strikers for inflation proof wage increases
- no cuts, tax the Rishi Rich, super profits of energy companies and others
- defend the democratic rights to protest, defend the eco-activists
- general election now, Tories out
- fossil free by 2030

The democratic rights issue is particularly important as the government's public order bill proposes even more draconian restrictions on the right to protest. So far, Sunak has shown no qualms about supporting them.

Going forward, we have no illusions that Starmer will lead a radical government. He is more interested in a prawn cocktail offensive to woo business than solidarity with any strikers. A more detailed action plan is needed on the left, which can begin with some of the more progressive policies proposed by the Labour Party on the Green transition, the new public energy company, proportional representation, and constitutional reform, including for Scotland and Wales. We can reshape them into policies that can begin to challenge capitalist rule. Such demands will have increasing traction if the confidence and self-organisation of working people develops as a result of the strike wave, cost of living campaigns and the eco-revolt.

Nesrine Malik, writing for the [Guardian newspaper](#) on the 24th of October against the ideology of "adult" politics, puts her finger on what opposition we need:

Even among a fuming opposition there is a sort of bloodless anger. "The damage to mortgages and bills has been done," tweeted Keir Starmer as if the economic impact is being felt by pieces of paper rather than people. It seems everyone has understood that injecting feeling and channelling the fear and deprivation that stalks people every day disqualifies you from being taken seriously as a politician. The "adult" approach seems to be keeping the markets happy and achieving abstract "growth", rather than also prioritising the security of those so on the margins they cannot benefit from that growth; those who will suffer most when the next round of soberly dictated cuts arrive.

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Source [Anti*Capitalist Resistance](#).

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