

## **Clowns to the Left of Me, Jokers to the Right**

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The title of this blog, 'Clowns to the left of me, Jokers to the right', comes from lyrics in Stealers Wheel's 1973 hit single, *Stuck in the Middle with You*. Written by late Scottish Singer Gerry Rafferty (1947-2011), the song is based on his experience of meeting music executives and obsequious 'hangers on' in London who he considered interested only in maximising profit.

Music, unsurprisingly, like any business, is about making money.

Availability of finance (money) is what makes any 'system' tick. As a friend claimed about 25 years ago, "there's only one class of people more obsessed with money than the rich, the poor!"

There's a lot of talk about poverty at present.

The cost-of-living crisis which, exacerbated by conflict in Ukraine, has caused energy prices to rise at an alarming rate, has resulted in a rate of inflation currently just over 11% (BBC, 2022).

Conflict in Ukraine, which has resulted in many tens of thousands of deaths of defending citizens and invading Russians, as well as significant numbers of seriously injured, has caused food prices to rapidly rise.

Food and non-alcoholic drinks rose by 16.2% in the year to October which was an increase from 14.5% in the year to September.

As a direct consequence, millions of families and individuals in this country are experiencing severe pressure on their finances and ability to pay bills (Romei, 2022).

Tragically, for many, there'll be the extremely difficult choice between whether to eat or to heat their home. The fact we're in the midst of an arctic blast that's caused temperatures to drop dramatically makes a bad situation much worse.

According to research carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF), due to the "dangerously cold" weather we're experiencing, more than 3 million low-income UK households will be unable to afford to heat their homes (Weaver, 2022).

Weaver explains that analysis by JRF indicates that despite the £25 cold weather payments, paid to those on low income when average temperatures are 0°C or below for seven days in a row, "710,000 households will still struggle to pay for warm clothing, heating and food" (*ibid*).

Joseph Rowntree Foundation's research, to be published in a full report next week, will underline quite how dreadful things will become for millions of hard-pressed families, individuals and pensioners as an evolving crisis becomes dreadful.

It's against this backdrop we're experiencing industrial action on a scale not seen for a generation.

This includes workers across a range of sectors, including railway workers, staff working for the Border Agency (which will potentially reduce the number of flights over Christmas), ambulance staff, nurses, postal workers, teachers, university staff, driving examiners and bus drivers (BBC, 2022a).

Notably, whilst domestic news outlets are focused on the impact that strikes are having, there's increasing media attention from outside the UK.

The *New York Times*, for instance, reports on the way in which labour unrest is heightened as trade unions attempt to address the decline in spending power and standard of living of workers and suggests “Britain is bracing for much worse” (Nelson, 2022).

Nelson believes that public sector unions are engaged in industrial action to protect services “being hollowed out by underfunding” and demonstrate why membership confers strength through collective action.

For many on the right, though the narrative has been focused on Conservative policies which claims that improved prospects for all is possible, there’s a traditional antipathy to this being achieved through agreeing wage demands by workers achieved by strike action.

As a consequence of this view, there have been the usual headlines in particular outlets which regard the current spate of industrial action as orchestrated for malign political purposes.

Unsurprisingly, the likes of the *Daily Mail* argue that tough action is needed to deal with unions led by militant bosses (Warren, Wilcock and Tapsfield, 2022). There’s a sad irony that only a couple of years ago, during the pandemic, such workers were regarded as heroic – and some clapped each week – for continuing to work whilst the majority of other workers were told to stay at home.

Opprobrium directed towards trade unions engaged in taking industrial action surely reached a new low when chair of the Conservative party, Nadhim Zahawi, recently claimed that strikes by nursing staff between now and Christmas is “exactly what Putin wants to see” (Mason, 2022).

The argument, propounded by the *Daily Mail* that current industrial action is a “general strike in all but name” is palpable nonsense. Current legislation prohibits secondary action; any strike can involve only workers in that union. Organised action to be legal needs to achieve a clear mandate and is tightly controlled by rules of what can be done by strikers.

Seminal commentator Paul Mason, writing in the *New Statesman*, makes the cogent point that “Even Ukrainian workers are fighting for their own rights – that’s the point of union solidarity” (2022).

The last general strike in this country, in 1926, was to support striking mineworkers and organised by the TUC (General Council of the Trades Union Congress) in an unsuccessful attempt to stop wage reductions and declining conditions for the 1.2 million mine workers who’d been ‘locked-out’ by employers.

Even if they wanted to, the TUC are legally prohibited from organising a general strike.

Nonetheless, across almost the entire spectrum of the media, the line being propagated is that the country faces a situation which resonates with the state of affairs faced by former Labour party leader and PM Jim Callaghan in the winter of 1978-79 when there were widespread strikes by unions.

Known as the ‘winter of discontent’, the Labour government faced opposition to its imposition of a limit on pay increases to control inflation which had remained high for most of the decade.

As history attests, Callaghan, who’d become PM in 1976 when Labour leader Harold Wilson suddenly resigned and had been forced to seek a bailout from the International Monetary Fund because of the sterling crisis a couple of months later, became a figure of derision among the unions. He also faced a barrage of headlines from the right-wing press suggesting he was unable to provide adequate leadership.

Callaghan's defeat on the May 1979 general election ushered in the Conservative party led by Margaret Thatcher who, it appeared, relished conflict with the trade unions which popular opinion, assisted by the same sort of sensationalist headlines we're seeing in some papers currently, claimed to be enemies of democracy.

Rishi Sunak, when he takes time to reflect on 2022, will undoubtedly wonder whether the dream of replacing Boris Johnson was what he'd anticipated.

Until early July Sunak was chancellor under Johnson. Sunak's resignation, though not the deciding factor in Johnson's decision to step down, was certainly instrumental in giving other ministers the confidence to resign.

His anticipated elevation to the top political job was delayed by the fact that when there was an election to replace Johnson, party members chose Liz Truss in preference to him. Her seven-week premiership, which Sunak has now overtaken, will be remembered for the infamous 'mini budget' introduced by her chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng which has left him with severely depleted public finances.

Demands by public sector unions for wage increases to match inflation are in contrast to the fact that taxes are going up and the majority of government departments being expected to cope with effective cuts.

Some suggest that the line from government that pay rises to workers are unaffordable is open to interpretation (Partington, 2022).

Times are tough though and, unfortunately, going to become a great deal tougher:

"Britain's economic outlook is bleak. The Office for Budget Responsibility, an independent fiscal watchdog, forecast last month that living standards, as measured by disposable household income adjusted for inflation, would fall 7 percent over the next two fiscal years, the biggest drop in records going back to the 1950s." (Nelson, *ibid*)

Sunak will be well aware that by the time of the next general election, which must be held no later than very early 2025, unless there's an unexpected economic turnaround, which would be miraculous, UK citizens will feel worse off than they did in December 2019.

Sunak knows that without an upturn in the opinion polls which look dire for the Conservatives, his party face the sort of rout suffered by Callaghan in 1979 and John Major in 1997 which ended 18 years of Tory rule.

There are rumours that the party may attempt to replace Sunak with election winner Johnson as a way of avoiding such a Labour landslide though many believe that another change could be deeply unpopular with voters (Harris, 2022).

However, Sunak's ability to manoeuvre is extremely limited.

Dealing with the industrial action which is (and will be) taking place over the coming weeks and months is a thankless task.

Calls by government to unions to appreciate that inflation is temporary and engage in wage restraint are extremely unlikely to be heeded.

Sunak is well aware that any attempt to buy off unions, even if it were financially possible, would be strenuously resisted by right wingers within his own party who believe it has become too liberal under his premiership.

Accordingly, in the absence of other options, Sunak is reputedly considering a legislative approach to strikes.

Using laws to deal with workers attempting to improve their standard of living may assuage the more libertarian and free-market elements within the Tory party, as well as winning applause from the right-wing press (Swinford, 2022).

However, it runs the risk of being seen as an escalation between the richest parliamentarian and working people who were promised by Johnson that “getting Brexit done” would improve their prospects.

Even if Sunak does introduce legislation to outlaw action by key public sector unions, this may not be enough to garner support from restless Conservative backbenchers who see him as not sufficiently able to control the narrative as Johnson was able to achieve with ‘skilful’ use of language, some would say sophistry, many assert downright lies.

*The Telegraph’s* associate editor Christopher ‘Chopper’ Hope, who’s usually very well-informed, contends that what Sunak needs to worry about is that many Conservative members are defecting to Reform UK, the right-of-centre party, run by Richard Tice and Nigel Farage, which offers lower taxes, more secure borders and cheaper energy (2022).

There are rumours of MPs considering defecting to Reform, similar to what occurred under David Cameron when Conservatives defected to the when the UK Independence Party.

As a direct consequence of the ludicrous arrangement Johnson agreed to with the EU the economy will continue to suffer. The notion that this deal can be renegotiated, like many within his party claim is possible with the Northern Ireland protocol, is for the birds.

Creating a solution to the problem caused by the deal to leave the EU negotiated by Johnson, will necessitate a compromise which Sunak knows Eurosceptic MPs would reject.

As Rafael Behr in the *Guardian* contends, “Sunak can govern the country or manage the Conservative party, but not both” (2022).

Behr concludes his piece by stating his belief that as people become increasingly concerned with surviving the winter and into the spring, when energy for the majority ends, and as public services inevitably decline, “the needs of the country and the fixations of Conservative MPs will diverge faster and harder.”

The reality of Sunak’s position is that he cannot please either the clowns or jokers; there are too many divisions.

The immediate future looks decidedly grim for Sunak and, unfortunately, the country.

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