

Understanding the Importance of Sense and Sensibility

Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Birmingham City University

Jane Austen's first novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, published in 1811, her first book published is, among her many millions of fans, regarded as classic. In it, Austen observes the relationships of the three Dashwood sisters and their widowed mother forced out of their family estate and now in much reduced accommodation owned by distant relative Sir John Middleton.

Though many like to debate the precise message of *Sense and Sensibility*, there's general agreement that the first word was meant to emphasise the importance of reason, rationality, and wisdom and prudence (Looser, 2022). More prosaically, to exhibit common sense. Austen's use of the word sensibility is, it's generally believed, meant to underline the need for sensitivity, sympathy or emotionality.

Crucially, Austen in her characterisation within *Sense and Sensibility* heavily points out the need for all individuals to display decency and, as would be expected of those enjoying the positions in public life of the time when it was written (late eighteenth century), honour and duty.

Whilst there's no shortage of texts considered relevant to politicians, *The Prince*, Niccolò Machiavelli's sixteenth century political treatise being a particular favourite, given the present state of affairs, which includes failure of services across a wide range of sectors and at national and local level, all who enter public service would surely benefit from reading *Sense and Sensibility*.

A year ago, on Tuesday 6th September, Liz Truss travelled to Balmoral in Scotland to meet the late Queen Elizabeth who asked her to form a government.

The late Queen, performing her last public duty before her sudden death two days later, was universally acknowledged to be a paragon of common sense. What she made of the woman who would turn out to be the last PM to serve under her, will never be known. Discretion was a hallmark of her reign.

As we were to quickly see on her return to London, Truss made several grandiose claims of the changes her government would herald. In particular, she briefly described how she intended to deal with the economic crisis then (and still) confronting the nation, causing many millions to feel poorer.

Her plans were, as commentators pointed out, and to put it mildly, economically questionable and lacking in sense.

As a consequence, her time in No 10 Downing Street turned out to be historically short.

Having won the contest against then former Chancellor Rishi Sunak to replace Boris Johnson who, following a series of scandals, had been forced to resign, Truss lasted only lasted 49 days in office due to the financial fallout of her chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng's notorious 'mini budget'.

Whether either Johnson or Truss have ever read *Sense and Sensibility* is impossible to say. What is certain is their grasp of common sense and ability to display sensitivity was tenuous.

Truss' ludicrous obsession with 'trickle down economics' would have resulted in, according to the Institute of Fiscal Studies, an estimated £60 billion of unfunded tax cuts. Unsurprisingly, the financial markets took fright and ensured the nation's citizens, most especially those seeking mortgages, felt a great deal worse off.

Far too frequent lack of dedication to upholding the highest standards of decency, honour and duty is most certainly characteristic of Johnson. His way of dealing with issues was to simply ignore them and hope they'd go eventually away.

Though Truss' commitment to Parliamentary standards are arguably better than the man she replaced, her refusal to commit to the appointment of a replacement for ethics advisor Lord Geidt, who'd quit under Johnson in June 2022 in conceding the PM had broken the ministerial code over his involvement in the 'Partygate scandal', was telling.

Indeed, prior to her 'mini budget', it should not be forgotten that one of Truss' first decisions on becoming PM was to sack permanent secretary at the Treasury Tom Scholar whose role was precisely to give advice on the wisdom of financial planning by the government.

Intriguingly, Johnson's immediate predecessor, Theresa May, has experienced a radical rehabilitation since she was forced to announce her resignation in May 2019 and formally left office on 24th July.

As extracts from May's book, *The Abuse of Power: Confronting Injustice in Public Life* (to be published by Headline on September 14th) make clear, as the daughter of a vicar, she sees maintenance of standards as a Member of Parliament as essential to demonstrate integrity (May, 2023).

All of those referred to above are linked by the issue of a Brexit that's cast a shadow over British politics since the ill-fated inclusion of a promise in the Conservative 2015 election manifesto to hold a referendum on continued membership of the European Union.

What's obvious to all who've analysed the arguments made by those who campaigned for the UK to leave the EU, is a distinct lack of evidence to support their claims.

Promises of a better future for all have yet to transpire.

As opponents of Brexit, pejoratively referred to as 'remoaners', argued in run-up to the referendum, leaving the largest trading bloc in the world would achieve nothing positive for the UK's economy and, they believed, create uncertainty and long-term damage.

Though we're still in the relatively early days of the post-Brexit era, it's safe to say there's consensus that we're worse off as a consequence of the momentous and uncomfortably narrow outcome of the referendum in June 2016.

Worryingly, what Brexit has allowed, it seems, is a willingness by some high-profile politicians to engage in making specious assertions deliberately intended to trigger emotions among particular voter groups.

As such, integrity, decency, honour and most importantly as far as British politics is concerned, truthfulness have become commodities all too easily jettisoned in pursuit of power.

Truss, forced to resign, was replaced by Rishi Sunak who she'd vanquished only a couple of months previously.

Sunak, who'd resigned in exasperation at his then boss Johnson's behaviour in early July 2022, came to office portraying himself as a decent and honest alternative to his two immediate predecessors.

Importantly, it should be remembered, Sunak had been a passionate supporter of leave though, to be fair, his enthusiasm for Brexit has on becoming PM, appears to have waned.

Protecting the UK economy from the impact of having effectively imposed sanctions on itself by, having fulfilled the will of the people through a trade deal negotiated by Lord Frost whilst Johnson was PM, appears to have become paramount.

Moreover, as the economy continues to falter as a direct result of supply chain issues caused by a combination of Brexit and the pandemic as well as a rapid rise in energy costs due to conflict in Ukraine, has resulted in inflation proving 'sticky'.

The only remedy, the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee altering interest rates, has meant the base rate has risen 14 times and increased from 0.1% in early December 2021 to the current level of 5.25%.

This has caused a tremendous shock among both householders and business.

Any hope Sunak on becoming PM would create stability and improve the country's economic outlook has vanished.

Larry Elliott, the *Guardian's* economics correspondent in 'UK's growth is a silver lining – and the clouds suggest recession looms', writes that though revision to GDP figures by the Office for National Statistics demonstrates the country recovered from lockdown to deal with the pandemic more quickly than previously believed, and that Brexit is not as economically destructive as detractors had suggested, there's little to be optimistic about:

"Manufacturing is struggling, and house prices are sliding. There is precious little money in the kitty for pre-election tax cuts. Inflation is proving hard to shift and strikes by hospital doctors and railway workers are set to continue. The Bank of England is slowly throttling the economy with its increases in the cost of borrowing."

Assuming the next general election takes place in Autumn 2024, we can expect all political parties to use the next twelve months to set out what they will include in their manifestos.

It's safe to assume Sunak and his cabinet colleagues, including chancellor Jeremy Hunt, will emphasise how much progress the Conservative Party is making in repairing the nation's finances.

Equally, given the Conservatives languish some 14% behind Labour in polls according to market research company Opinium (Reuters, 2023), Sunak *et al* will use every trick in the election playbook to attempt to reduce this gap.

This will include rubbishing Labour at every opportunity.

When your party is looking down the barrel of a gun, Sunak will draw upon his experiences of fighting the last general election when Johnson's absurdly ambitious predictions of what'd occur if allowed to assume power and 'Get Brexit Done'.

At the time of writing, two stories dominate the headlines.

One concerns schools closed because of Raac (reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete) having been used in construction and now regarded as in danger of collapse.

The other is the issuing of a section 114 notice by Birmingham City Council which, as the legislation from which doing this, the Local Government Finance Act 1988, states:

"The chief finance officer of a relevant authority shall make a report under this section if it appears to him that the expenditure of the authority incurred (including expenditure it proposes to incur) in a

financial year is likely to exceed the resources (including sums borrowed) available to it to meet that expenditure”.

In effect, Birmingham City Council is bankrupt though, unlike a high street business, the council in whatever form is considered effective, must continue to deliver essential (statutory) services.

Stephen Bush, associate editor of the Financial Times (2023) believes these two stories tell us much about the way in which previous cuts in public spending have impacted on the quality of infrastructure and the ability of local authorities in delivering the level and quality of public services that should be expected by all citizens but especially those who have greatest needs or are most vulnerable.

The crisis in schools many believe is linked to austerity introduced by chancellor George Osborne when David Cameron was in coalition with the Liberal Democrats from 2010. This was in the aftermath of the Global Financial when the UK, like the rest of the developed world, was reeling from the impact of emergency financial measures introduced to remedy the consequences of ‘casino banking’ but erroneously blamed on Labour’s extravagance whilst in office.

As commentators point out, problems currently besetting local authorities are in no small part a direct result of 13 years of Conservative rule.

Significantly, Rishi Sunak, now the PM, when he was chancellor cut budgets for school maintenance proposed by Department of Education that might have alleviated the current crisis with Raac.

Importantly, during the upcoming party-political conferences, will we continue to hear the two main parties claim taxes will either be reduced (Conservative) or that more can be achieved by spending more wisely combined with better management (Labour)?

Stephen Bush’s view is emphatic when he suggests they need to recognise the changed landscape:

“For all Hunt likes to pretend he will cut taxes and Rachel Reeves [shadow chancellor] says that she won’t introduce new asset taxes, the “new age of big government” means that both politicians will be tax-raising chancellors.”

The reality is that leadership of within both the Conservative and Labour parties are likely to be as honest about where money can be garnered to fix the increasingly long list of severe problems needing urgent investment.

This unfortunately, is the nature of politics and the guidance on how to behave offered by Jane Austen in *Sense and Sensibility* some 200 years ago is wasted on them.

Perhaps, if they wished to read a text that’s absolutely contemporary and written by an ex Conservative minister and leadership contender who, as well as campaigning stay in the EU, was a contender for the 2019 leadership contest, oozes integrity, decency and honesty.

Politics on the Edge: A Memoir from Within is written by Rory Stewart and due to be published by Jonathan Cape on 14th September.

As Stewart believes, his former party has been taken over by an increasingly right-wing mentality offering policies based on giving potential voters what focus groups believe they want to hear rather than the imaginative fact-based solutions likely to produce genuine and sustainable change (Harding, 2023).

We can only hope things get better.

However, I fear, this won't be anytime soon.

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