

The King's Speech – A Case of Thin Gruel?

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Much attention was given to the King's Speech when King Charles III went to the Palace of Westminster and, on a gilded throne in the House of Lords, declared legislation Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's government intends to pass in Parliament in the forthcoming session which will sit, with recesses, until next summer.

Many pointed out the significance of this being the first King's Speech for 72 years. The last was delivered by George VI whose death in 1952 resulted in his eldest daughter Queen Elizabeth succeeding him and reigning until her death in 2022.

A monarch possessing absolute supremacy over the country occurred in 937 when King Æthelstan, following the Battle of Brunanburh, united the kingdoms of England.

However, the tumultuous events of the 17th century including the period when Oliver Cromwell ruled as Lord Protector from December 1653 until his death in September 1658, led to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.

A constitutional monarchy is one in which the Sovereign – becoming so through accession through the 'line of succession' – is Head of State but, crucially, development and ability to create legislation is entirely the responsibility of elected members of Parliament.

The pomp and ceremony accompanying the visit by the reigning monarch to mark the opening of a new session of Parliament is visually sumptuous and provides exactly the sort of stereotypical scenes used by foreign news organisations to demonstrate what a peculiarly quaint, some would argue anachronist, place Britain remains.

For example, the *Washington Post* reported that King Charles III "wore a very heavy crown", "Someone called Black Rod had a door slammed in her face" and a "lawmaker was held "hostage" by Buckingham Palace", all of which "seem slightly confusing to the uninitiated" (Adam, 2023).

In *The Conversation*, Lang considers the visit by King Charles to be a form of 'political theatre' in which MPs are invited to attend 'the other place', as the House of Lords is frequently referred to in the House of Commons, contains what are reenactments of events that occurred almost four centuries ago and have, beyond historical reference, have no importance to the way in which policy is achieved through the legislative process.

Once he'd delivered his speech, the King and his wife Queen Camilla departed from the Palace of Westminster in their horse-drawn gold carriage.

His role in democracy is purely ceremonial.

Lang makes clear that part of the theatre is for the monarch to avoid giving the impression by intonation or facial expression they have any views on the policies the government intends to achieve:

"The monarch has the right to advise, warn and encourage the prime minister on policy. In return he must always follow the prime minister's advice and he must read the prime minister's speech. This means that a monarch might solemnly read out a speech written by one party, and, a year later, if there has been a change of government, equally solemnly read out a speech outlining a completely different programme and written by their opponents."

Assuming nothing untoward happens to King Charles, and having spent his whole adult life preparing to assume a role he was born into, what's known as primogeniture (Britannica, 2023), he'll hope to carry out this function many more times.

That cannot be said of Rishi Sunak whose prospects appear much less certain.

Whilst the next general election must occur by January 2025, meaning it would be entirely conceivable that Sunak could be PM this time next year, perceived wisdom is that he'll 'not wait until then.

So, it may reasonably be surmised, this was the final King's Speech of the current administration under Sunak.

For this reason, beyond the inevitable pomp, the contents of what King Charles read was scrutinized to discern what Sunak believes will allow him to oversee a recovery in his government's reputation and, by dint, improve the Conservative Party's electoral prospects.

However, it's hard to believe that voters will be enthused by Tuesday's speech to vote for the Conservatives similar to four years ago in mid-December 2019 when, to the surprise of most commentators, Boris Johnson delivered an 80-seat majority by promising to 'Get Brexit Done!'

Much has changed since then, not least of the fact that having delivered the largest parliamentary majority in a generation, Johnson is no longer leader – nor indeed an MP – and was replaced by Liz Truss whose place in history as the shortest serving PM will surely not be surpassed.

Which brings us to Rishi Sunak who's only been PM for just over a year.

Sunak was appointed by his party to bring stability to the Conservative government in the belief it would assist the party in repeating the success of 2019.

King Charles provided an overview of the 21 laws the government wishes to pass in the current session.

Significantly, a third are recycled by being carried over from the previous session or having been published already.

Early in his speech, King Charles made reference to the government's frequently stated intention to "focus is on increasing economic growth and safeguarding the health and security of the British people for generations to come" through continued "action to bring down inflation [and] to ease the cost of living for families and help businesses fund new jobs and investment" (Gov.UK, 2023).

Additionally, the King stated, his government's will "help household finances, reduce public sector debt, and safeguard the financial security of the country" (*ibid*).

There is no doubt making voters feel more optimistic about the state of their finances is essential for any political party to win winning a general election.

This election is occurring four years after the people were promised they'd be better off by electing Johnson and thereby enabling him to do what his immediate predecessor Theresa May had been unable to achieve, to fulfil the outcome of the June 2016 referendum on continued EU membership by leaving.

So, as announced by King Charles, as well as licensing of new oil and gas fields, based on the supposition that this will allow the country to transition to net zero by 2050 "without adding

undue burdens on households”, there was also inclusion of the government’s intention to create the means to legislate for a phased smoking ban to create a “smoke-free generation”.

It’s also intended that a new regulator for English football be created, to give judges the power to compel criminals who’ve been convicted to appear before them to be sentenced and, with relevance to the current conflict in Gaza, to enable a ban on any public organisation that boycotts Israel.

Many were unimpressed by what they heard.

Chris Mason, the BBC’s political editor, considers what was set out by the King to be the government to be “very Sunakian: iterative, rather than explosive” and that if there had been any expectation of surprises and a “frisson from the unexpected”, they’ll have been deflated (2023).

Beth Rigby, writing on *Sky News*’ website concurs and thinks that what was presented on Tuesday “amounted to not that much” (Rigby, 2023).

Many within the party, it appears, are equally unimpressed.

Rigby quotes a former cabinet minister who made plain they believed that what was on offer in the King’s Speech was “just depressing” and added “It stinks of ‘we are managing but we have lost the will to lead’”.

Significantly, and undoubtedly with reference to the leader who won the last general election, Rigby’s source asserted Sunak is merely a “technocrat” who’s not demonstrating sufficient leadership and despite the majority the party still enjoys, “[we’re] not making use of it and there’s nothing in this for the public to say, wow that’s interesting” (*ibid*).

Financial Times columnist Robert Shrimley in his article ‘The strategic confusion at the heart of Rishi Sunak’s final push’ neatly sums up the dilemma (2023). As he contends, “Sunak cannot be both change and the continuity candidate. Is he a radical reformer or reassuringly dependable? Self-image also affects decision making. Is this a government of bold strokes — say on tax cuts — or prudence?” (2023)

Moreover, Shrimley believes, “Faced with stagnant polls and drift”, it’s likely any strategy will “fall away, to merge with, “You can’t trust Labour”” to become the only unifying message his party can realistically rally around.

Shrimley’s concluding comment, that what Sunak’s government proposes “signals a lack of political clarity” suggests a government still working out “not only what it wants to say, but what it is trying to be”.

This aligns with the views of many others who speculate the current inability by Sunak’s government in achieving substantive policy will continue until the next general election.

Worryingly, in the meantime, Sunak must deal with the fall out of the ongoing findings of the covid inquiry (Middleton *et al*, 2023), allegations of rape by an unnamed Conservative MP (Fisher, 2023), and the ongoing behaviour of the person appointed as home secretary, Suella Braverman.

Braverman’s allegations of police bias, it’s alleged, demonstrates increasing willingness to say whatever she believes expedient in appealing to populist opinion and which, it’s claimed, is borne of a desire to be sacked in order to position herself as the next Conservative leader (Syal and Mason, 2023; Hardman, 2023).

Confronted with such challenges Sunak might be forgiven if he was tempted to do what the four previous Conservative PMs have done and declare he's had enough.

Safe to say Sunak won't do this and will continue to lead his party into the next general election.

Latest opinion polls suggest he'll lose by a landslide.

Whatever happens, as the richest member of Parliament and, according to the *Sunday Times*' 'Rich List' (Brady, 2023), with wife Akshata, daughter of an Indian billionaire, are the 275th most wealthy couple in the country.

Sunak's future prospects are assured which is more than can be said for millions of voters.

Unfortunately, the consequence of the current malaise within Sunak's government will be continued uncertainty and inertia.

This will progressively undermine confidence and potential investment and achieve the opposite to the stated intention contained in the King's Speech.

The citizens of the UK deserve better than what amounted to the thin 'gruel' (thin porridge – Merriam-Webster, 2023) King Charles was constitutionally required to serve up on behalf of his government.

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