

Rwanda or Bust!

Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Institute for Design, Economic Acceleration & Sustainability (IDEAS) and Senior Fellow, Centre for Brexit Studies, Birmingham City University

There's been much discussion and analysis concerning Home Secretary Priti Patel's declaration that, in future some refugees arriving in this country, having crossed the English Channel and seeking asylum, will be sent to Rwanda to be permanently resettled there. Given how controversial this plan is, it's unsurprising that it has attracted widespread opprobrium.

As always with such a policy announcement such, the government would be assumed to have contemplated criticism. That the 'Rwanda solution' to dealing people arriving from France in small boats and dinghies, making this an extremely hazardous journey which has already resulted in many deaths, has led many to raise concerns will not come as a surprise.

In Tuesday's debate concerning this plan, former Conservative leader Theresa May made clear her misgivings as to whether the policy achieved expected standards of "legality, practicality and efficacy" (BBC, 2022). It did have support. Jonathan Gullis, Conservative MP for Stoke-on-Trent North, argued that sending asylum seekers to another part of the world is what people wanted when they voted to leave the European Union (EU) in June 2016 (Peat, 2022).

Many charities have condemned what's regarded as a callous policy. Chief Executive of the Refugee Council, Enver Solomon, described it as "cruel" and "nasty" Equally, the UN's refugee agency considers the policy will breach international law.

Breaking international law would normally give any government cause to reflect on the wisdom of intended actions. However, this is a government with experience of engaging in 'pick and mix' approach to the law.

Nonetheless, for Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby to, on Easter Sunday, describe sending refugees 4,000 miles to a country in Africa as "ungodly" surely marks a new low in the esteem with which the current government is held.

A number of commentators believe that the government's intended policy of sending migrants to Rwanda is so outlandish it's unlikely to ever be implemented. Sunder Katwala, director of British Future, believes that as well as the legal challenges the policy will face, being exorbitantly expensive, it won't appeal to voters in the same way as occurred at the last general election (Iqbal, 2022).

Katwala's cynicism to the efficacy of sending migrants to Rwanda is shared by many who believe it's simply intended as a ruse to deflect attention from negative headlines generated last week concerning the two most senior members of government. Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Chancellor Rishi Sunak received fixed penalty fines from the Metropolitan Police due to contravention of lockdown rules introduced by this government to arrest the rate of coronavirus infection.

As Scott (2022), points out, the significance of this fine is that Johnson becomes "the UK's first serving prime minister to be sanctioned for breaking the law." Unsurprisingly, opposition parties are calling for the resignation of the PM and his chancellor.

Though Johnson and Sunak have both apologised for their behaviour, there's no likelihood of them walking away from their roles in government. Johnson made a statement in which he stated he feels "an even greater sense of obligation to deliver". Sunak, in offering his apology, claimed he's "focused on delivering for the British people."

The event for which Johnson and Sunak received their fines, a party organised to celebrate the PM's birthday in June 2020, is reputed to be only the first of many others for which further fixed penalty fines will be imposed on the holder of the highest political office (Crerar, 2022). Johnson's supporters have offered support for him and proffer reasons why they believe vilification he's been subject to in receiving the fixed penalty fine is overblown.

Peter Hitchens, in his *Daily Mail* article, 'We ruined Britain but what do people get furious about? A cake in a Tupperware box', is especially excoriating of those who criticise the PM who he thinks has fallen foul of "lawless rules" to deal with the virus which represented "madness". Intriguingly, though he claims he'd happily see Johnson quit if there was anyone better to take over, he pulls no punches as to the current crop of MPs at Westminster; "Our current Parliament is a care home for nonentities, unmatched in our long history for mediocrity, ignorance and dimness. Who would be better?"

Daniel Hannan, who, as well as being an Adviser to the UK Board of Trade is founding president of the Initiative for Free Trade, writing in the *Washington Examiner*, claims that Johnson did nothing wrong (2022). The overwhelming majority of Conservative MPs have avoided offering any public opinion on Johnson, presumably waiting to see if further fines are imposed and wanting to gauge reaction of voters in the forthcoming local elections.

There are some notable dissenting voices among Conservatives.

Nigel Mills, Conservative MP for Amber Valley in Derbyshire, believes the PM's position is untenable. Craig Whittaker, Conservative MP for Calder Valley, in a Facebook Q&A with his constituents, called for Johnson and his chancellor to "do the right thing and resign" (Phipps, 2022). Conservative peer Lord David Wolfson, who, presumably recognising the incongruity of his position as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice, decided to quit last week.

There have been other high-profile scalps as a consequence of rumours of partying in No 10 who've lost their jobs (Adu, 2022). Memorably, Johnson's Press Advisor, Allegra Stratton, resigned whilst making a tearful statement outside her home last December following footage leaked showing her laughing about a Downing Street party and being asked a hypothetical question as to how it could be explained.

Even though other 'staffers' including, Dan Rosenfield, Martin Reynolds, Jack Doyle and Kate Josephs, who assisted in writing the rules concerning lockdown, have all departed, MPs and, more especially, ministers, have preferred to keep their counsel undoubtedly knowing that disloyalty is regarded as a heinous sin by Johnson.

Instead, we've been treated to a succession of ministers and aides to the PM attempting to defend his actions by playing down its significance as a misdemeanour (Abdul, 2022). As well as the most implausible excuse of Johnson being "ambushed with cake" (MP Conor Burns), there's been the argument that a fixed penalty fine is no worse than receiving a speeding or a parking ticket. This line was used by Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis in media interviews on Tuesday morning for which he was castigated (Abdul and Allegretti, 2022).

Culture Secretary Nadine Dorries, who appears to revel in her role as prominent cheerleader for the PM, tweeted fulsome support for him. As well as claiming, incorrectly, the UK was the first to offer a vaccine to the virus, she cited the leadership role played by him as ally to Ukraine's President Zelensky in being the "first to offer lethal aid to Ukraine" (Mellor, 2022).

A number of those who responded to Dorries took issue with her interpretation of events and facts. Many contend her actions are motivated by someone intimately engaged in the current government's ongoing efforts to obfuscate facts considered inconvenient. Worse, Dorries is seen by many as typical of ministers' willingness in presenting versions of truth that deliberately contradict what's known about events and are explicitly intended to suit whichever narrative is believed will convince potential voters this is an administration in control of events and dedicated to improving their prospects.

In the midst of a rapidly developing cost-of-living crisis in which there's intense concern about the ability of many families to pay bills, it's debatable how well the potential 'Rwanda solution' will play among voters. On Tuesday, a number of executives from energy firms, giving evidence to Parliament's Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, warned of the impending crisis that will occur due to increasing prices for gas and electricity (Pickard, 2022).

Michael Lewis, Chief Executive of EON UK, claimed that between 30% and 40% of people in Britain could experience 'fuel poverty' from October when industry regulator, Ofgem (Office of Gas and Electricity Markets), is expected to once again raise the price cap for energy (Clinton and Jolly, 2022). Because conflict in Ukraine is likely to continue over the summer, another large hike in the price cap is all but certain.

Lewis told the committee that what Sunak had implemented to assist families already was "not nearly enough" and believes the impending crisis so great as to require "unprecedented action" by government. Keith Anderson, Chief Executive of ScottishPower echoed Lewis' sentiments by claiming that next winter could be "horrific, truly horrific."

Anderson suggested that a deficit fund, based on government intervention to reduce energy bills by £1,000 for those considered vulnerable or in fuel poverty is required. This money could be repaid over ten years.

Given the portents, it's hardly a surprise that a range of economic experts are predicting the risk of Britain experiencing recession this summer has heightened (Partington, 2022).

If things didn't look dreadful enough already, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the UK faces worst inflation shock of the G7 nations over the next two years (Rees, 2022). The IMF believe the UK's economy will be 1% smaller this year and in 2023 than it forecast in January (Khan, 2022).

That there's an issue with migrants crossing the English Channel is beyond doubt. It's believed that so far this year, in excess of 5,000 have arrived, three times as many as by this time last year (Drummond, 2022). According to official figures, 28,526 crossed the Channel in small boats last year. It's expected that if the current rate of arrivals continues, the total for 2022 could be over 60,000.

Though many defending the government's policy of sending people crossing the Channel claim it's borne of a desire to undermine the profitability of those engaging in people-smuggling, there's a good shout that the policy represents the worst of so called 'dog whistle' politics. This is based on creating messages intended to appeal to particular groups of voters (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

Using immigration and the economic concerns of 'left behind' voters worked in favour of leave in the vote on continued EU membership in June 2016 and ensured Johnson won an 80-seat majority in December 2019. Many consider that sending some of the migrants who arrive in this country in small boats from France, mainly young single men, to Rwanda, may appeal to those who supported leave and voted for the Conservatives in getting 'Brexit done'.

However, there's increasing evidence that voters are weary of the government's willingness to employ high-profile policies intended to produce 'heat' explicitly meant to appeal to those who've been seduced to believe immigration is the reason for their lack of economic prosperity and ability to progress. As such, particularly during a cost-of-living crisis when times are going to get much, much worse, such deflection tactics may become much less effective.

Instead, the argument that solving the issue of refugees by a ludicrous policy of spending, it's reported, £120 million, to pay Rwanda to process them, which was attempted by Israel but spectacularly failed (Lawless, 2022; Mack, 2022), in order to save money will seem grossly insulting to those experiencing genuine fear about their ability to pay for essentials such as food, clothes and energy.

Boris Johnson's government are increasingly likely to find the major issues confronting them are 'bread and butter' ones, such as increased cost of basic items and services and a better future for them and their children. This was promised by leaving the EU which would increase exports and, significantly, reduce the number of EU citizens working in this country.

As Peat (2022a) reports, a poll of 2,000 people conducted by JL Partners, in which they were asked what they think of Johnson to produce a 'word cloud', provided some interesting results. 72% of respondents' words were negative with only 16% positive. Words such as liar, idiot, untrustworthy, resign, buffoon and dishonest were popular among respondents, as were bumbling, corrupt, lying, mistakes, embarrassment, awful and clown.

Notably, Lord Hennessey who's acknowledged as an expert on the history of Parliament, believes Boris Johnson's behaviour, which has led him to being fined for attending a party, as well as misleading Parliament has "shredded the ministerial code," (Wells, 2022). Lord Hennessey stresses that this has resulted in what he considers to be the "most severe constitutional crisis involving a prime minister."

Come the next general election, voters will wish to vote to achieve a government truly dedicated to the task of working to improve people's lives rather than engaging in the sort of behaviour exhibited by the present holder of the office of PM.

As demonstrated on far too many occasions, all that seems to matter to Boris Johnson, as well as the ministers who obsequiously serve him, is self-aggrandisement and clinging to office by proclaiming policies with little or no connection to reality.

Citizens of this country deserve better and can't come a moment too soon.

References

Abdul, G. (2022), "He was ambushed with cake' and other stories: Tories get creative to defend PM", *Guardian*, 19th April, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/apr/19/he-was-ambushed-with-cake-and-other-stories-tories-get-creative-to-defend-pm>, accessed 19th April

Abdul, G. and Allegretti, A. (2022), 'Partygate penalties 'like parking fines', says cabinet minister', *Guardian*, 19th April, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/apr/19/partygate-penalties-like-parking-fines-says-cabinet-minister>, accessed 19th April

Adu, A. (2022), 'All the people who lost their jobs over Downing Street lockdown-busting parties', *Mirror*, 12th April, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/people-who-lost-jobs-over-26696373>, accessed 19th April

BBC (2022), 'Rwanda asylum seeker policy: Ex-PM Theresa May criticises government plan', *BBC UK News*, 19th April, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61153677>, accessed 20 April

Clinton, J. and Jolly, J. (2022), 'Energy chiefs fear 40% of Britons could fall into fuel poverty in 'truly horrific winter'', *Guardian*, 19th April, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/apr/19/energy-chiefs-fear-40-of-britons-could-fall-into-fuel-poverty-in-truly-horrific-winter>, accessed 19th April

Crerar, P. (2022), 'Boris Johnson faces THREE more Covid fines as PM is warned 'worst is to come'', *Mirror*, 13th April, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/boris-johnson-faces-three-more-26708169>, accessed 19th April

Drummond, M. (2022), 'Migrant crossings: More than 5,000 people make journey across Channel in small boats so far this year', *Sky News*, 14th April, <https://news.sky.com/story/migrant-crossings-more-than-5-000-people-make-journey-across-english-channel-in-small-boats-so-far-this-year-12585355>, accessed 19th April

Hitchens, P. (2022), 'We ruined Britain but what do people get furious about? A cake in a Tupperware box', *Daily Mail*, 16th April, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-10724697/PETER-HITCHENS-ruined-Britain-people-furious-cake-Tupperware-box.html>, accessed 19th April

Iqbal, N. (2022), 'Will the UK really send refugees to Rwanda?', *Guardian*, 19th April, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/audio/2022/apr/19/will-the-uk-really-send-refugees-to-rwanda>, accessed 19th April

Khan, M. (2022), 'IMF slashes global growth forecast as it warns of inflation danger', *Times*, 19th April, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/imf-slashes-global-growth-forecast-as-it-warns-of-inflation-danger-0dh67fjpp>, accessed 20th April

Lawless, J. (2022), 'Israel precedent prompts outrage as UK plans to send refugees to Rwanda', *Times of Israel*, 15th April, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-precedent-prompts-outrage-as-uk-plans-to-send-refugees-to-rwanda/>, accessed 19th April

Mack, E. (2022), 'Like the UK, Israel tried sending refugees to Rwanda – it didn't work', *Independent*, 19th April, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/refugees-migrants-israel-britain-rwanda-b2060595.html>, accessed 19th April

Mellor, J. (2022), 'Nadine Dorries is rinsed over her pathetic excuse for PM's partygate fine', *London Economic*, 19th April, <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/news/nadine-dorries-is-rinsed-over-her-pathetic-excuse-for-pms-partygate-fine-319847/>, accessed 19th April

Merriam-Webster (2022), 'What's the Political Meaning of 'Dog Whistle'?', *Merriam-Webster Website*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/dog-whistle-political-meaning>, accessed 19th April

Partington, R. (2022), 'Britain could fall into recession this summer, say experts', *Guardian*, 18th April, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/apr/18/britain-could-fall-into-recession-this-summer-say-experts>, accessed 19th April

Peat, J. (2022), 'Tory MP says deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda is what people wanted when they voted Brexit', *London Economic*, 20th April, <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/tory-mp-says-deporting-asylum-seekers-to-rwanda-is-what-people-wanted-when-they-voted-brexit->

[319963/?utm_medium=onesignal&utm_source=onesignalwp&utm_campaign=sitpush](https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/word-cloud-paints-less-than-complimentary-picture-of-pm-319963/?utm_medium=onesignal&utm_source=onesignalwp&utm_campaign=sitpush), accessed 20th April

Peat, J. (2022a), 'Word cloud paints less than complimentary picture of PM', *London Economic*, 19th April, https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/politics/word-cloud-paints-less-than-complimentary-picture-of-pm-319816/?utm_medium=onesignal&utm_source=onesignalwp&utm_campaign=sitpush, accessed 19th April

Phipps, A. (2022), 'Conservative MP calls for PM Boris Johnson to resign after fine', *BBC News*, 14th April, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-derbyshire-61098842>, accessed 19th April

Pickard, J. (2022), 'Energy chiefs warn of 'truly horrific' autumn for British households', *Financial Times*, 19th April, <https://www.ft.com/content/207d744b-07d9-478b-a6d5-b40982c23bc7>, accessed 19th April

Rees, T. (2022), 'Russia and China threaten 'tectonic shift' in world economy, IMF warns', *Telegraph*, 19th April, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2022/04/19/world-economy-risks-fragmenting-wake-russia-ukraine-war-imf/>, accessed 20th April

Scott, J. (2022), 'Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak reject calls to resign over lockdown fines', *BBC Politics*, 13th April, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-61083402>, accessed 19th April

Wells, I. (2022), 'No 10 parties: PM's lockdown fine constitutional crisis, says historian', *BBC Politics News*, 18th April, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-61134002>, accessed 19th April

Dr. Steven McCabe is co-editor of *Exploring the Green Economy, Issues, Challenge and Benefits* (ISBN-13 979-8532032347) and companion text, *Green Manufacturing, What this involves and how to achieve success* (ISBN-13 979-8751284619). *Stop House Prices Rising! The Essential First Fix For the Broken Housing Market* (ISBN:9781739726102), co-authored with Conall Boyle and *Another Way: A call for a new direction in British foreign and defence policy*, co-authored with Roger Schafir (ISBN: 978-1739726133), were published recently.