

## Are the Tories About to 'Jump the Shark'?

**Dr. Steven McCabe, Associate Professor, Birmingham City University**

Anyone who grew up in the 1970s will remember television shows which were 'must see' and, to greater or lesser extent, influenced fashion and attitude. One such show was *Happy Days*, an American sitcom first shown on the ABC channel there and sold to Britain.

Running between January 1974 and 1984, *Happy Days* became hugely popular and based on teenagers living in Midwestern America in the 1950s. It's remembered for two key characters, Richie Cunningham and 'cool cat' Arthur Fonzarelli, usually referred to as 'Fonzie' or 'The Fonz'.

The problem for script writers of *Happy Days* was that after three years, the somewhat whimsical stories were beginning to feel repetitive. Something was needed to inject excitement to refresh the show, a classic dilemma for every scriptwriter though much harder to achieve in 1977 when social mores were far more conservative.

Something novel was a story in an episode in September 1977 in which Fonzie and other key characters of *Happy Days* went to Hollywood. However, and memorably, Fonzie went water-skiing in swimming trunks but wearing his trademark white tee shirt and leather jacket as part of a challenge to his machismo in which he had to jump over a shark.

Critics questioned whether *Happy Days* had lost its allure. This preposterous plotline, they argued, demonstrated a desperate attempt to recapture the formula which had once made the show so successful.

Crucially, in 1985 Jon Hein, now an American radio personality and his then University of Michigan roommate Sean Connolly coined the phrase to 'jump the shark' based on this episode of *Happy Days*. As the online Urban Dictionary (2023) states, to jump the shark means:

"The beginning of the end. Something is said to have "jumped the shark" when it has reached its peak and begun a downhill slide to mediocrity or oblivion."

Which brings us to the current state of British politics.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, whose rise to the most senior position in British politics last year is well known, is increasingly finding his position difficult.

Sunak is beset by a range of apparently intractable issues including the fact that inflation is eroding pay which is leading to industrial action across a wide range of sectors.

Strikes by public sector workers, most particularly in health, are posing a challenge to Sunak reminiscent of that faced by 'Sunny' Jim Callaghan in the 1978-79 'winter of discontent'.

For a man who, following the forced resignation of his former boss Boris Johnson, caused in part by his own resignation in exasperation at his continuing errant behaviour, there's a pervading sense that as well as the many enemies outside the party, particularly trade unions, Sunak faces implacable foes within.

Sunak whose fall and return in becoming PM is largely due to his willingness to tell the hard truths about the state of the economy, prides himself on being a pragmatist and the ability to engage in compromise.

Delicate compromise is needed in dealing with the matter of Northern Ireland and reaching an agreement about how to deal with the one part of the country which, as well sharing a land border with an EU country (Republic of Ireland), voted to remain (55.8%).

As Sunak, who was a committed Brexiter will know from the wealth of data emerging as to the impact of the UK's departure, the deal negotiated by Johnson to allow this to happen has been entirely negative (Webber, 2023).

Whatever statements he may make about the virtues of Brexit, parroted by his opposite number Sir Keir Starmer, he surely acknowledges the need to create a much better relationship with the EU which still remains the UK's most significant trading partner (Webber and Parker, 2023).

However, achieving such a relationship, which requires a resolution of the operation of the Northern Ireland Protocol is tricky.

Any deal with the EU, regardless of how important this may be to maintenance of peace in Northern Ireland remains as well as the need to improve the state of the British economy will be viewed as a 'sell-out' by hard-line Brexiteers within his own party.

As Iain Martin, writing in *The Times* claims (2023), Brexit, which brought about the demise of David Cameron and his successor Theresa May, and has "bedevilled British diplomacy" for the outcome of the June 2016 referendum could potentially bring about Sunak's demise, should the spartan Brexiteers believe the time is right to topple the man they hold largely responsible for removing Johnson.

Sunak may feel he has nothing to lose and may be tempted to jump these sharks.

Announcements made by Sunak in his speech just after the New Year suggest he's low on original ideas.

Vague promises of better times ahead are not likely to impress voters who are experiencing a simultaneous drop in living standards due to inflation at its highest for decades whilst there's economic uncertainty and a drop in house prices (Bruce, 2023).

Raphael Behr wrote a strident piece in the Guardian in which he neatly summed up Sunak's current position (2023):

"He is in Downing Street because his party preferred leaders who soiled the office. Someone had to clear up the mess. It is hardly a mandate to boast about, but if it is forgotten, the Tories' fragile loyalty to their least-worst choice vanishes too. He has won no elections, nor even any arguments. He is neither the keeper nor the builder of a legacy, just a placeholder prime minister, averting his eyes from the past, silent on the future, marooned in the present and shrinking every day."

Sunak appears to believe his image is enhanced by taking on 'sharks' within trade unions demanding the standards of living of members are maintained.

However, as many critics point out, by attempting to portray trade unionists as enemies within, as Margaret Thatcher famously claimed, he's effectively taking on millions of people experiencing a drop in real wages.

Seminal social historian Andy Beckett, writing in *The Guardian* cites the experience of former Conservative leader Edward Heath half a century ago in attempting to deal with unions whilst trying to undermine them through the 1970 industrial relations bill (2023).

Beckett concludes that Heath's attempt to show who really ran the country ended in his party losing power and contends, "If you're a struggling Tory prime minister, victories on paper over the workers probably won't save you."

There's a sense that the Conservative Party is regarded as certainly beyond its peak and, following the ructions of last year in two changes of leadership, is on a downward trajectory. Many even within the Conservative Party believe that there's likely to be electoral punishment in the local elections which are due to be held in May.

The Conservative Party, so resilient to crises in the past and having shown itself able to adapt to prevailing circumstances, in order to stay in power, faces the imminent threat of losing seats on May 5<sup>th</sup>.

Having replaced Boris Johnson, under whom the Tories 'enjoyed' a deficit in the polls of less than ten percent and following the historically brief but calamitous premiership of Liz Truss, Rishi Sunak was the MP the party has turned to, in order to 'steady the ship'.

However, under former Chancellor and statistician 'wonk' Sunak, polls have gone the wrong way and, according to respected organisation YouGov/Times, voting intention data collected just prior to Christmas show the deficit between the Conservatives and Labour to now be 24% (YouGov, 2022).

Whilst replacing Truss with Sunak may have improved the 31% deficit the Conservatives suffered as a consequence of her desire to break economic orthodoxy by the imposition of her 'mini budget' in September, the anticipated bounce has not been as great as hoped.

Conservatives, who've been in power since 2010, are getting twitchy. Many, including eminent psephologist, Sir John Curtice, who believes Tory support has "unravelling", speculate an 'wipeout' of the sort experienced under John Major in 1997 is entirely possible (Gye, 2022).

Little wonder there's an increasing view that the big test for Sunak will be the local elections in just under four months in early May.

However, it's worth remembering that the council 7,000 seats which are being voted on were last contested in England when Theresa May was leader of the Conservatives and best by her inability to achieve agreement for her withdrawal deal. For the record Labour was led by Jeremy Corbyn.

Nonetheless, it's hardly surprising the Tories didn't perform well – they won 31%, the same as Labour. Sunak is under pressure to lead his party to a better outcome than occurred in 2019. Failure to do this will, as the *Telegraph's* Associate Editor (Politics) Christopher 'Chopper' Hope wrote just over a week ago, mean trouble for Sunak (2023).

Though regarded by many as unlikely as the optics of another change in leadership would be poor, Hope is one of those who believe that should things go badly for the Tories in the council elections in May, Sunak could be come under intense pressure and that there's the possibility of a return of the politician who, because of his behaviour which, as well as leading to investigation and a fine whilst in office as PM, a first, resulted in a flurry of ministerial resignations in early July 2022.

Hope believe that provided the circumstances are right, which would include him being cleared by the Privileges committee, a number of MPs within the party who regret Johnson's being, as they see it, hounded from office, believe only Johnson is capable of ensuring they keep their seats at the next general election.

The recent resignations of Conservatives indicate that many believe there will be a glut of ex-Conservatives following the next general election. As the expression goes, “there’s nothing so ex as and ex-MP” (Row, 2021).

However, the key question must be asked as to what Johnson can do, beyond making all sort of elaborate and far-fetched promises as to the sunny uplands which await voters, if he were to once again become leader of the Conservative Party?

What can certainly be stated is that if Conservatives MPs welcome back ‘The Lord of the Lies’ (Littger, 2019) later this year, having jettisoned him only last year, this be viewed by voters as having ‘jumped the shark’ far more preposterously than anything Fonzie ever achieved in *Happy Days*.

## References

Beckett, A. (2023), ‘A lesson for Sunak: when the Tories take on striking workers, they don’t always win’, *Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> January, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/13/rishi-sunak-tories-striking-workers-trade-unions>, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> January

Behr, R. (2023), ‘Rishi Sunak is stuck peddling fake solutions – he can’t admit his own party is the problem’, 11<sup>th</sup> January, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jan/11/rishi-sunak-conservative-party-problem-13-years-rule#comments>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

Bruce, A. (2023), ‘UK house prices set for 15% drop, Nomura predicts’, Reuters, 12<sup>th</sup> January, <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uk-house-prices-set-15-drop-nomura-predicts-2023-01-12/>, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> January

Gye, H. (2022), ‘Sir John Curtice warns Conservative vote has ‘unravelling’ in 2022 with Labour winning Blair-style polling lead’, iNews, 25<sup>th</sup> December, <https://inews.co.uk/news/politics/john-curtice-conservative-vote-unravelling-2022-labour-winning-blair-style-polling-lead-2046678>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

Hope, C. (2023), ‘Partygate trial, local elections and a Boris comeback? Political predictions for 2023’, *Telegraph*, 3<sup>rd</sup> January, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2023/01/03/partygate-trial-local-elections-boris-comeback-political-predictions/>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

Martin, I. (2023), ‘Protocol peace could trigger Tory civil war’, *Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> January, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/protocol-peace-could-trigger-tory-civil-war-gzdtj0gxw>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

Row, A. (2021), ‘There’s nothing so ex as an ex-PM’, *The Critic*, 23<sup>rd</sup> January, <https://thecritic.co.uk/theres-nothing-so-ex-as-an-ex-pm/>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

Urban Dictionary (2023), ‘Jump-the-Shark’, Urban Dictionary Online, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=jump-the-shark>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

Webber, J. (2023), ‘“Genuine differences’ remain over NI protocol, says UK foreign secretary’, *Financial Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> January, <https://www.ft.com/content/5fdf0aa6-8448-4eb6-8c25-fb3be965245e>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

Webber, J. and Parker, G. (2023), ‘Starmer offers Sunak ‘political cover’ to clinch EU deal on Northern Ireland’, *Financial Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> January, <https://www.ft.com/content/20d11f7f-1f5d-48dc-a47d-dd459f45deb1>, accessed 13<sup>th</sup> January

YouGov (2022), 'Voting Intention: Con 24%, Lab 48% (20-21 Dec 2022)', *YouGov Website*, 29<sup>th</sup> December, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/12/29/voting-intention-con-24-lab-48-20-21-dec-2022>, accessed 12<sup>th</sup> January

**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), both published in 2021.**

***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, respectively, in January and April this year.**