

## **Integrity, Professionalism and Accountability?**

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Last October, in his address before entering Downing Street as new Prime Minister (PM), Rishi Sunak equivocally promised to do things differently:

“This government will have integrity, professionalism, and accountability at every level. Trust is earned and I will earn yours.”

For the sake of clarity, the definitions of the three operative words in Sunak’s statement are, according to Cambridge Online Dictionary (2023), are:

*Integrity*: the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles that you refuse to change

*Professionalism*: the combination of all the qualities that are connected with trained and skilled people

*Accountability*: the fact of being responsible for what you do and able to give a satisfactory reason for it, or the degree to which this happens

Following the three tumultuous years of Boris Johnson’s leadership, who frequently appeared to be a human ‘scandal magnet’ after which we experienced the historically short tenure of Liz Truss and her obsession with ‘voodoo economics’ (trickle-down theory), Sunak was meant to be the breath of fresh air voters, and a fair few Conservative MPs, craved.

Sunak, aged 42, whose rise to the top has been breathtakingly rapid – he’s only been an MP since 2015 – prospered under Johnson. Crucially, when he became leader of the Conservative Party in July 2019, Johnson considered Sunak’s experience in finance and investment banking meant that Sunak should be promoted to become Chief Secretary to the Treasury.

Sunak had the good fortune to be promoted to one of the highest offices of state, Chancellor, in early 2020 when Sajid Javid suddenly resigned.

Money, acquiring it and managing it, many assert, is key to Sunak’s success.

Indeed, with a personal wealth, estimated to be £730 million, and through marriage to Akshata Murty, daughter of N. R. Narayana Murthy who founded Indian multinational IT company Infosys, he’s the wealthiest MP and features among published lists of ‘super-rich’ citizens of the UK.

Unsurprisingly, there’s been a great deal of attention given to Sunak’s phenomenal wealth leading some to question whether he’s able to appreciate the financial pressures confronting millions of families.

Last March, when Sunak was chancellor, it was reported that Akshata, who’s an Indian citizen, enjoyed non-domicile status and able to reduce her liability to taxation to HMRC by millions of pounds (Issac, 2022).

Akshata has a reported £400m stake in Infosys, which has continued to operate in Russia subject to sanction as a consequence of its invasion of Ukraine, was believed to receive dividends which might be considered as, at best, highly questionable (Sky News, 2022)

It’s hard not to reach the conclusion Rishi Sunak’s first leadership bid was seriously undermined by his wife’s tax affairs.

Nonetheless, Sunak, who'd been beaten by Truss last summer, when she resigned due to a loss of faith in her as a direct result of the fallout of 'Trussonomics' which caused confidence in the UK to plummet, was welcomed back as the man most likely to restore confidence to money markets.

Working with incumbent Chancellor Jeremy Hunt who also vied for leadership of his party, and appointed by Truss in a desperate attempt by her to save her premiership after having sacked Kwasi Kwarteng as the 'architect' of the now infamous 'mini budget', Sunak offered the potential to ameliorate the damage.

Rupert Neale, the *Guardian's* 'wealth correspondent', speculated just before he became PM whether Sunak, who wears £3,500 Henry Herbert suits, £450 Prada loafers, drinks coffee from a £180 'smart mug', and owns sumptuous properties in this country and America, would be too out of touch (2022).

However, if anything, Sunak's wealth became an advantage.

As the argument went, if Sunak could employ his intimate knowledge of how financial markets operate to good effect, collectively we'd be better off.

Millions paying mortgages who, fearing a spike in costs at the end of their fixed rate deals which, coupled with the fact that energy costs had risen markedly, were undoubtedly supportive of sanity in 10 Downing Street.

Sunak's commitment to bring a different form of government based on integrity, professionalism, and accountability "at every level" was widely perceived to demonstrate that he, and of course, those he appointed to his government, would be beyond reproach.

We could look forward to ministers who no longer considered themselves to be above the rules and who engaged in ludicrous arguments to justify errant behaviour in office allowing them to enrich themselves and their backers.

Unfortunately, as the adage about strategies in war lasting only as long as contact with the enemy, Sunak's approach to government appears to have been based on the simple political expediency of ensuring he became leader and, thereafter, staying in power.

On becoming PM Sunak appointed as Home Secretary Suella Braverman who'd been forced to resign only days previously for leaking information. It's speculated that this was tactical in order to deal with a rump of the party instinctively right-wing.

Another questionable appointment is Dominic Raab.

Having served in a number of senior cabinet posts, Raab had been Deputy Prime Minister as well as Secretary of State for Justice and Lord Chancellor under Johnson, but was banished to the backbenches when Truss became PM.

Sunak re-appointed Raab to the posts removed from him by Truss.

As Pippa Crerar reported in Wednesday's *Guardian*, Raab is an individual with a reputation for being something of a martinet (2023). According to Crerar, there are "at least 24" complaints by civil servants against Raab as a consequence of his behaviour of which Sunak is believed to have been aware:

“Government insiders believe the depth of the inquiry and severity of some of the claims means the deputy prime minister will struggle to survive in post, and it throws further doubt on Rishi Sunak’s judgment for having him in such a senior position.”

So far so bad.

Which brings us to the latest controversy Sunak is assailed by, namely the tax affairs of Conservative Party Chair Nadhim Zahawi who’s been required by HMRC to pay a penalty as part of a total settlement of £5 million in unpaid taxes.

Zahawi has claimed the error in not paying sufficient tax for his businesses which include polling organisation YouGov, was “careless and not deliberate” but has provided no further information on the circumstances.

Significantly, on Thursday, head of HM Revenue and Customs, Jim Harra, told MPs there are “no penalties for innocent errors” and officials in his department don’t penalise taxpayers deemed to have taken “reasonable care” (Makortoff and Walker, 2023).

Though this a story which may appears to have surfaced recently, its origins are not. Last summer it was reported a “flag” had been raised by HMRC officials over Zahawi’s financial affairs prior to his appointment by Johnson as Chancellor following the resignation of Sunak (Savage and Ungood-Thomas, 2023).

As a source included in the article made clear, the fact that there were even flags raised was “extraordinary” and such allegations would be sufficient to ensure some would not receive an “MBE or OBE” but the notion that such a person could become chancellor or PM “is unbelievable”.

Indeed, as was reported by the *Independent*, Nadhim Zahawi’s finances had been secretly investigated by the National Crime Agency’s International Corruption Unit in 2020 as part of an enquiry codenamed “Operation Catalufa” (Walters, 2022). As is made clear, the investigation did not produce any evidence which demonstrated wrongdoing.

In an extensive analysis of Nadhim Zahawi, the *Financial Times*’s Jim Pickard, Raya Jalabi and Robert Smith examine the way in which having been born in Iraq, the current Conservative party chair has been able to amass considerable wealth through being an assiduous networker and cultivation of contacts (2023).

Kenber, Greenwood and Grylls in a *Times* present an admirably thorough account of Zahawi as man who’s capable of working the system in a way which involved alliances with powerful families (2023). This involved him, even though he was an MP, working as a ‘fixer’ for oil companies in Kurdistan for which he was paid £1.3 million.

As Pickard, Jalabi and Smith make clear, Zahawi’s career has been characterised by criticism for “blurring the lines between business and politics, between the public and the personal”. Indeed, they quote a former Tory minister who though believing Zahawi to be popular MP and who’s enjoyed success as a risk-taking entrepreneur, may finally have “flown a little too close to the sun” (*ibid*).

It’s instructive to recall the maxim that news stories involving scandal last ten days.

The ten-day rule originated in the time of former US President Bill Clinton among his press team who believed the media would persist with a story for this length of time before giving up and moving on.

Accordingly, the theory went, if you can 'tough it out' for ten days you'll survive.

Interestingly, former 'spin doctor' for New Labour, Alistair Campbell, claimed the press persisted with a news story for 10 to 12 days. As Campbell reckoned, once the party knew that it had a crisis, judicious action, usually involving a resignation or sacking, was necessary to avoid further damage (Independent, 2011).

Nadhim Zahawi is certainly a story which, at the time of writing (Thursday), shows little sign of abating.

It's a gift for Labour who see Zahawi as emblematic of a Conservative Party under the control of extremely wealthy individuals and in thrall to wealthy backers. However, the Tories under Prime Sunak appear intent in not relinquishing Zahawi's scalp (Telegraph, 2023) .

Sunak should be well aware that though political scandal is nothing new and every administration is assailed by various forms of wrongdoing. Such scandals leave a stench which, like treading in excreta of any kind, creates a smell which lingers on.

Johnson's errant behaviour, disregard for rules and willingness to tolerate wrongdoing by those around him, a trait utilised as part of his persona as a 'cheekie chappie' to appeal to voters, ultimately led to his downfall.

Sunak's promises of "integrity, professionalism, and accountability at every level" appear not to have materialised. Rather, scandals surrounding members of his cabinet will be perceived to indicate quite the opposite.

Meg Russell, Alan Renwick, Sophie Andrews-McCarroll and Lisa James who, as members of University College London's Constitutional Unit, wrote a thought-provoking blog considering what Sunak would need to do to keep his promise to ensuring integrity, professionalism and accountability were at the heart of his government (2022).

The advice to Sunak from Russell *et al* was that if he really wished to maintain his promises, he must strengthen the standards system, enhance parliamentary scrutiny, defend the rule of law, abide by constitutional norms and defend checks and balances (*ibid*).

The bounce in opinion polls taken after Sunak's appointment as replacement to Liz Truss has dissipated and it's certain the Conservative Party will pay a heavy price among voters who will see an administration which is out of touch with their concerns and the need to cope with rapidly rising bills for energy, food and mortgages.

Chris Hopkins, political research director at Savanta ComRes, writing in iNews contends that the controversy of Nadhim Zahawi's unpaid tax is cutting through to voters who will punish the Tories at the local elections in May and, more crucially, the general election which must take place within the next two years (2023).

Like many, Hopkins believes the current government has, for the last year and a bit, "been dogged by sleaze allegations and general misconduct in office".

Sunak, who held his first away-day as PM in his country retreat Chequers on Thursday with all his ministers, ostensibly to discuss priorities in developing strategy, will be all too aware his much-vaunted promises appear not to have not been fulfilled.

As many commentators conclude, the Conservative Party is now associated with sleaze similar to that which occurred under John Major's administration in the 1990s, and which ultimately led to

the party losing to Tony Blair's Labour Party in May 1997 which defeated it by a landslide (Forrest, 2023).

As things stand, Sunak may oversee an outcome at the next general election which is equally dreadful for his party.

Sunak may rue the fact his 'good fortune' in becoming PM following the demise of both Johnson and Truss is likely to be harshly judged by voters as a leader undermined by a combination of arrogance and inability of many closest around him to wholeheartedly subscribe to the vision articulated by him only three months ago.

This won't end well for Sunak.

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