

## **Rishi Shuffles the Pack, Plays a New 'Hands' and Introduced His 'Ace, 30p Lee'**

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Success in politics relies on managing impressions.

As a leader, once the public gains the sense you've lost control of events, it's extremely difficult to recreate their confidence that you and your party are worth voting for.

Rishi Sunak, appointed as Chancellor by Boris Johnson after Sajid Javid suddenly resigned in early 2020, will have seen at close quarters how chaotic management and immorality can be used, if not to your advantage, then certainly as a distraction tactic.

Saying you passionately believe in one thing but behaving in an entirely contrary way came as second nature to Johnson. Ultimately, it led to him being forced to resign early last July when a succession of those refusing to serve under him made it virtually impossible for government to function.

Current Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's elevation to the top political job owes everything to the chaos of his two predecessors. He's cultivated an image of stability and silling to make rational decisions based on what's good for the country.

However, as Sunak is discovering, being PM frequently requires taking fraught choices about the team around him.

From the outset of his premiership, Sunak promised he'd be committed to "integrity, professionalism and accountability". However, there've been questions about how his ability to reconcile this desire with the appointments of Suella Braverman and Dominic Raab against whom, certainly in the case of the former, there'd previously been a proven instance of wrongdoing (leaking).

A cynical, though logical interpretation, is that Sunak, by appointing self-proclaimed 'poster-girl' of the Tory right Braverman, was trying to assuage elements of his party who could undermine him.

Political expediency takes many forms and Sunak appears to be willing to demonstrate his ability to walk the 'tightrope of morality' from which the slightest slip is seized upon by critics in the opposition as well as within your own party.

We're discovering Sunak appears far more comfortable in being fleet of foot in terms of acceptance of allegations than his initial pronouncement on walking into Downing Street as PM might have suggested.

This is the reason, many believe, why Sunak supported former Party Chair Nadhim Zahawi despite the constant drip-drip of allegations against him concerning his tax affairs. Such allegations would, of course, have been uncomfortable for PM who faced them last March having when it emerged his wife was a non-dom. At the time, many speculated, they appeared to have ruined his dream of ever becoming PM.

Nonetheless, having received the report of an investigation by ethics adviser, Sir Laurie Magnus, which concluded Zahawi engaged in a "serious breach" of the code by not informing officials of the fact he was under investigation by HMRC when he was appointed Chancellor by Boris Johnson, Sunak immediately dismissed his party's chair (Crerar, 2023).

Should it be considered necessary following the conclusion of an investigation into the numerous allegations of bullying against Deputy PM Dominic Raab, Sunak may deal with him in the same way as Zahawi.

Sackings, difficult as they must be, are part and parcel of the job of being PM. Sentiment can play no part in the decision.

However, dispensing with the services of one politician opens the possibility of appointing another who, it's anticipated, may bring new perspectives and, additionally it's hoped, a sense among voters of positive change.

Zahawi's departure created such an opportunity for Sunak as well as reorganisation of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) to emphasise his priorities for government in the future.

Grant Shapps, who used to run BEIS will now lead a new Department for Energy Security and Net Zero. This department will have a similar purpose to the objective being pursued by Labour's Ed Miliband in focusing on creating sustainability in Britain's energy supplies whilst reducing reliance on fossil fuels.

Appointing Michelle Donelan, who was Culture Secretary, to lead a Science, Innovation and Technology Department, which combines digital responsibilities she'd previously held with the science portfolio of BEIS, demonstrates Sunak's long-held view of the importance of developing new ideas that may achieve commercial success vital to economic prosperity.

Finally, as part of Sunak's reshuffle, what remains of BEIS will be merged with Kemi Badenoch's Department for International Trade to become the new Business and Trade Department.

Badenoch, it should be remembered, is a former leadership candidate whose name features regularly as a likely contender to replace Sunak should he lose the next general election.

On face value these changes appear sensible though, as pointed out, any major alteration in government departments takes months, if not years, to produce discernible benefit, frequently long after the minister(s) involved have moved on (Parker and Pickard, 2023).

In appointing Greg Hands as Zahawi's replacement in the post of Party Chair, Sunak undoubtedly hopes that, to use a deliberate pun, he'll be the proverbial 'safe pair' [of hands] regarded as essential leading up to local elections taking place on 4<sup>th</sup> May.

In making changes to ministers and departments Sunak will hope they produce improvement in opinion polls which, at present, look woeful for his party.

As Christopher Hope, the Telegraph's Associate Politics Editor writes, following a poll of 28,000 people carried out by pollsters Find Out Now and Electoral Calculus, were a general election to take place immediately, the Conservative Party would receive only 23% of the vote (2023). As this poll indicates, Labour would win 509 of the 650 seats available, a phenomenal number, the SNP would win 50 and the Conservatives by winning 49, and coming third, would no longer even be the main opposition party in Westminster.

As if to add to the misery that such a wipe-out would produce, this poll suggests 15 Cabinet ministers would lose their seats including Rishi Sunak, Foreign Secretary James Cleverly, Home Secretary and Suella Braverman.

Whilst one isolated poll – Find Out Now and Electoral Calculus’ was conducted between January 27<sup>th</sup> and Feb 5<sup>th</sup> – is merely a momentary snapshot and certainly not an accurate predication, there’s increasing panic among Conservatives that Sunak needs to demonstrate leadership which shows demonstrable improvement in opinion polls.

However, it’s hard to see how potential voters are going to be enthused to vote Tory on the basis of the changes made by Sunak this week.

Nonetheless, the first major electoral test which Sunak faces is now less than twelve weeks away; the local elections (Guardian Editorial, 2023).

As Sunak will be well aware, the last time all local elections were contested in May 2019, when Theresa May was PM, his party received a drubbing among traditional voters disillusioned by her inability to achieve Parliamentary support for her withdrawal deal with the EU.

May, who’d valiantly attempted to achieve a Brexit producing as little harm to the country as possible, had lost the support of the many, especially ardent Brexiters, within her own party.

Dismal local election results in May 2019 hastened May’s eventual resignation and her departure led to Boris Johnson whose chaotic premiership ended last July. Johnson was replaced by Liz Truss whose historically short time in No 10 will be forever remembered for the notorious ‘mini budget’.

Making Sunak leader was supposed to mend the reputational damage created by his two immediate predecessors.

However, Sunak appears to believe things are now so dreadful that in his reshuffling of his ‘pack’ he must play an ‘ace’ in attempting to revive his party’s prospects.

I refer to the appointment of Lee Anderson as deputy Conservative Chair.

Anderson is notable for many reasons (Peat, 2023).

Only a couple of weeks ago Anderson compared the current Conservative Party to be like the band playing on the Titanic. His appointment by Sunak clearly sends the message that if Anderson doesn’t like the tune being played by the Tories, perhaps he has a better one?

Having become a Member of Parliament for Ashfield in Nottinghamshire in the December 2019 ‘Get Brexit Done’ general election, Anderson had only joined the Tories the previous year having defected from the Labour Party which, then led by Jeremy Corbyn, he claimed under the control of the hard left.

Anderson is the populists’ populist for whom no dog whistle is too extreme (Mata and Bulbul, 2023).

Voted Tory backbencher of the year for 2023 in a poll among Conservatives, Anderson appears to exalt in making explicit statements which many believe chimes with former Labour voters in so called ‘red wall seats’ who defected to the Conservatives in December 2019.

Like Sunak, Anderson is a fervent Brexiter who’s happy to air controversial views which includes the need to reduce immigration, dealing with “nuisance tenants” by making them live in tents and picking potatoes and the fact he believes nurses shouldn’t need to use food banks.

As Anderson told the *Spectator* this week, he supports the return of the death penalty as with no attempt to realise the idiocy of his comment, “nobody has ever committed a crime after being executed” (Heale, 2023).

It’s been made clear by Sunak that Anderson’s views on the death penalty are in no way a reflection of the party’s policy (Morton, 2023).

For those unaware, Anderson’s nickname comes from last May when he invited MPs to come and see a food bank in his constituency where those receiving food parcels are required to register for a budgeting and cooking course (Gregory and Mathers, 2023):

“We show them how to cook cheap and nutritious meals on a budget – we can make a meal for about 30p a day – and this is cooking from scratch,” said the Nottinghamshire MP. “I think you’ll see first-hand there’s not this massive use for food banks in this country.

“We’ve got generation after generation who cannot cook properly, they can’t cook a meal from scratch, they cannot budget.”

Infamously, when campaigning in the 2019 general election, Anderson was filmed by BBC journalist Michael Crick talking to people on the doorstep. One was memorable in that the person posed as an ex-Labour voter who expressed some distasteful views and would vote for him. This person had been a set up as Anderson had forgotten he was wearing a microphone which recorded the encounter being organised.

Little wonder that Anderson’s appointment has been greeted with, to put it mildly, disdain by a number of political commentators.

Writing in the *inews*, Ian Dunt is trenchant in his condemnation of Anderson who he describes as a “Red Wall rottweiler” who is “without any moral restraint, or even basic politeness, which might guide many civilised people” (2023).

The *Guardian*’s political correspondent Peter Walker claims that Anderson is a “one-man controversy machine” whose appointment by Sunak though “doubtless cheer[ing] a number of Anderson’s “red wall” colleagues [...] it is also fair to say at least some fellow Tory MPs will have their head in their hands at the news” (2023).

As Walker contends, allowing Anderson to promote the Conservative Party prior to May’s local elections runs the risk of him saying whatever comes into his head. Walker believes, many Conservative MPs worry Anderson’s appointment will “end badly, and quickly” (*ibid*).

Ian Dunt is more forthright in his opinion about the changes made by the PM this week:

“Anderson’s appointment negates the seriousness which Sunak claims to represent. His reshuffle made some perfectly sensible changes to departmental responsibilities. To have orchestrated all that and then made Anderson deputy chair is like carefully constructing a model railway set and then covering it in custard pie.” (*ibid*)

The expression ‘to play the joker’ is usually understood to mean that it’s a wild card which adds random element to games and affects the odds.

Perhaps Sunak’s decision to appoint ‘30p Lee’ is a desperate attempt to play what he sees as an ‘ace in the hole’ to connect with ‘red wall’ voters who may be tempted to return to Labour or abstain in the forthcoming local elections.

Sunak should also be aware Anderson's appointment comes with risk.

Anderson may become a joker whose tendency to engage in controversy and rash pronouncements, though appealing to some, could make the quest by Sunak to win seats across the whole country in May, including among more liberally minded Conservatives parts, even more difficult than it already appears to be for the party's candidates.

If the results of the local elections go as badly as some suggest (Reuters, 2023), Sunak may find himself having to confront an increasing number of MPs as well as party members arguing that, like the last two Conservative leaders, his continuance as PM is counterproductive to the impression of competence and success.

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