

The Highly Dubious Electoral Advantage of Rishi's Promise to 'Stop the Boats'

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In announcing his government's intention to 'Stop the boats', a slogan first used by Liberal leader Tony Abbott to win the Australian general election in 2013 (Doherty, 2023), what does PM Rishi Sunak hope to achieve?

My view is that Sunak, though much less charismatic than his former boss Boris Johnson – but far more savvy in working out strategy – is engaging in a carefully orchestrated campaign in balancing his 'good' guy, 'bad' guy persona.

A couple of weeks ago, I mused over whether Northern Ireland might prove as difficult to Sunak's premiership as it had done for Theresa May four years ago when she failed to convince her party that her deal with the EU (European Union), including the notorious 'backstop', (McCabe, 2023).

Brexit has dogged every Prime Minister (PM) since David Cameron resigned the morning after the referendum seven years ago in June 2016. It's undermined our relationship with our closest neighbours, made our economy smaller and created divisions within families, communities and, of course, Parliament.

Sunak, having been at the centre of government for the last three since becoming Chancellor following the surprise resignation of Sajid Javid, will be well aware of the challenges Europe poses. He'll intimately appreciate the criticality of sovereignty and its criticality to Conservatives and those who vote for his party.

Leaving the EU, it was promised, would go to make the UK more prosperous by ending freedom of movement of EU citizens who were able to live and work here. Voters in 'left behind' communities where 'traditional manufacturing' has declined or disappeared since the 1980s, were believed to be instrumental in voting to end this right.

Exclusion of those considered not to be British became a totemic rallying call for the UK Independence Party which was causing support to drain away from the Conservatives. The response of the Conservatives has been to match this rhetoric.

The consequence of having won the referendum to leave the EU led to a form of tumult which, as the general election of December 2019 demonstrated, has caused a shift in opinion to be far more accepting of language which flirts with racism in a way once considered unpalatable.

'Getting Brexit Done', a catchy slogan, neatly summarised the objective of making the UK somehow purer and less welcoming to those who, in the past would have considered this country to be a safe haven if they were fleeing war or any number of social issues which put them at serious risk. A direct result was the stance of many of the intake of Conservative MPs following the 2019 general election who appear comfortable in demonising those who attempt to gain entry to this country through whatever means available to them.

For many years the Conservative Party has struggled to effectively deal with immigration to the UK. The stated intention of many was to control so as to reduce it to tens of thousands at most.

Creating a less hospitable climate for EU citizens has meant that many with vital skills have decided to return home. Accordingly, we've lost individuals able to contribute to the UK's economic prosperity.

This was seen by many within the Conservative Party as a price worth paying to ensure the 'Holy Grail' of sovereignty. Being able to control who came into the UK was regarded as the minimum expectation of Brexiters.

What appears to be driving the current agenda within the Conservative Party is concern by some, especially on the right wing, that immigration remains an unresolved matter and requires tough action.

This perception, regardless of the facts and underlying issues, has become essential due to data produced by the Office for National Statistics showing that total net migration for the year ending June 2022 was 504,000.

As the Migration Observatory based at the University of Oxford makes clear, though an increase on pre-pandemic levels which, depending on the actual measures used, was between 300,000 and 400,000, there were particular reasons why last year was so high (2022).

The Migration Observatory point out that the 504,000 figure was caused by the largest war in Europe since 1945 (Ukraine), combined with a significant increase in non-EU migration which has corresponded with an equally dramatic fall in EU net migration.

Significantly, the contention that immigration into the UK is a particular problem is not borne out comparison with other countries:

"By the beginning of the 2020s, the UK's foreign-born population was approximately 14%. This share is similar to high-income countries such as the United States and Spain."

Nonetheless, many believe the UK admits too many migrants. Interestingly, and with significance to the current climate, as the Migration Observatory states, "The foreign-born population in Australia, for example, is roughly double that of the UK as a share of the population." (*ibid*)

Almost seven years after the referendum and over three years since the UK left the EU, immigration remains central to Conservative ideology and dogma. As this week's announcement makes plain, those arriving by small boats across the English Channel are a problem which demands immediate action.

Intriguingly, those arriving by small boat has risen with alarming speed since numbers started to be collected in 2018 (BBC, 2023). As the BBC explains, 45,755 people were recorded as arriving by small boat last year and accounted for "about 45% of asylum applications made in 2022" (*ibid*).

For a Conservative Party that's long promised its desire to reduce immigration, those arriving by small boats visually represent a direct challenge to this objective.

The fact that there are estimated to be more than 166,000 people currently awaiting a decision on whether they can be allowed to remain in the UK through an application for asylum, according to many within the government, underpins the need to take radical measures.

Economically the cost of housing these people is considerable. It's believed that housing those awaiting asylum decisions costs £6 million per day; almost £2.2 billion per annum (Burke, 2023).

Little wonder that when Sunak meets President Macron on Friday for the first bilateral summit between Britain and France in five years, he may be willing to accede to the request to "make annual multimillion-pound payments to France to fix the small boats crisis in the Channel" (Grylls, 2023)

However, dealing with small boats is not a new problem.

As many will remember, last April, under PM Boris Johnson, a previous home secretary, Priti Patel, introduced the government's intention that "some" of those who entered the UK "without a visa or other permission would be sent to Rwanda to have their asylum claim processed and decided there." (Red Cross, 2023).

Last December the High Court ruled that this plan was lawful though, in January it ruled that people facing potential removal to Rwanda would be able to appeal any decision.

What was announced by PM Rishi Sunak on Tuesday in attempting to deal with those arriving by small boat is, even for a political party which has lurched to the right, pretty draconian.

In announcing the illegal migration bill on Tuesday afternoon, Sunak claimed that such legislation would deter those coming to Britain by small boat and allow the UK to "take back control of our borders, once and for all" (Wallis, Cameron-Chileshe and Parker, 2023).

This bill will, if implemented mean that the home secretary would override all existing international legislation, including obligations under the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), which currently allows any person entering this country to automatically claim asylum. Only those under 18 and those who are deemed to be sick – there was no indication of what defines admissible illness – would be exempt.

Home secretary Suella Braverman was quoted in bellwether of right-wing opinion, the *Daily Express*, as explaining this bill would push "the boundaries of international law" and acknowledged it would be subject to scrutiny by the courts with only had a 50/50 chance of being accepted, it's possible to see that the Sunak and his government are engaging in a form of signalling to those who believe immigration to be a problem.

It's notable some Conservative MPs have stated their intention to oppose any legislation they consider in direct contravention of the UK's international obligations.

At the very least this shows how far the Conservative Party has come from the days when it proudly proclaimed its pride in upholding international law and respect for refugees.

So, it appears, within the last week or so we've seen two faces of Rishi Sunak.

Last week the PM announced agreement of a new arrangement with the EU for trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. What's to be known as the Windsor Framework (2023), he promised, will create sufficient alteration to the Northern Ireland protocol introduced under Boris Johnson to allay fears of Unionists and Loyalists, and improve our relationship with the largest trading bloc in the world.

As the introduction to the document categorically states, what's been agreed with the EU will ensure delivery of "the promises of Brexit while preserving the hard-won gains of the past 25 years in Northern Ireland" to provide "certainty and providing the basis for a more sustainable and prosperous road ahead for Northern Ireland and the whole United Kingdom."

Though it's not certain this measure will be accepted by the most difficult to please MPs, the Democratic Unionist Party who've been refusing to engage in the Northern Ireland assembly until the protocol agreed under Boris Johnson has been scrapped, their silence thus far gives cause for optimism.

That the Windsor Framework states that the Northern Ireland protocol bill, which would unilaterally rewrite an international treaty, has universally been acknowledged as an act of statesmanship

by Sunak. Moreover, that the only voices against this were the 'usual suspects' among the hard right of his party among the European Research Group (ERG) is hardly a surprise.

However, in announcing the illegal migration bill, which Sunak could have deputised to his home secretary as it's her legislation, he explicitly demonstrates a willingness to be seen as embracing policy which, in undermining the UK's position in upholding human rights, is directly different to what he was advocating last week when he stood beside EU President Ursula von der Leyen.

So, what's Sunak trying to achieve?

Ultimately, it appears, Sunak is attempting to play politics using the issue of immigration that worked so well for Johnson in adopting the slogan 'Get Brexit Done' in December 2019.

The continuation of demonisation of those seeking to enter this country to claim asylum will, he and his advisors calculate, play well among those voters convinced to vote to leave the EU almost seven years ago and support Johnson in completing the objective of withdrawal in 2019.

Being seen to deal with 'Small boats', a highly visual issue plays well to such voters.

It's significant that a YouGov poll published in November found that 32% 'strongly support' banning migrants who arrive in the UK this way. 18% 'somewhat support' the policy. In effect over half the public thinks that the government's approach on immigration is not sufficiently robust (Thiel, 2023).

In an recent interview with another outlet sympathetic to the argument that immigration is a problem, the *Mail on Sunday*, Sunak pulled no punches:

"Illegal migration is not fair on British taxpayers, it is not fair on those who come here legally and it is not right that criminal gangs should be allowed to continue their immoral trade. I am determined to deliver on my promise to stop the boats. So make no mistake, if you come here illegally, you will not be able to stay." (Owen, 2023)

However, the policy to deal with small boats could come at a potentially high cost.

As Lisa O'Carroll, the Guardian's Brexit correspondent reports, "according to legal experts", should the UK government believe it needs to withdraw from the EHCR because of its stance, on small boats crossing the English Channel, the trade agreement with the EU might be terminated by the EU (2023).

This should surely make Sunak consider the worth of the policy he's staked so much on.

However, whether the illegal migration bill ever becomes legislation matters less than Sunak providing the impression he's happy to support such legislation.

Besides, the leaking of an email purportedly by home secretary Suella Braverman, which she claims not to have seen before it was sent on Tuesday evening to Conservative Party supporters yesterday, in which she criticises of how "an activist blob of Left-wing lawyers, civil servants and the Labour Party" will block the party in dealing with small boats is helpful to underpinning Sunak's reputation among the right of his party (Crerar and Allegretti, 2023).

Sunak knows that with poll ratings for the Conservatives, which are still well over 20% behind Labour, and with local elections now less than eight weeks away, he needs to demonstrate to his party a return to the success enjoyed under 'Heineken' politician Boris Johnson – who can reach parts other MPs cannot.

Playing to the right wing of his party with small boats appears a choreographed 'trade-off' for Sunak's perceived softening of his government's position on Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol.

Sunak knows that Brexit in whatever form it takes no longer has the potency it once held. Polls show voters are bored with this issue. What's crucial is improving the economy through better relationships with the EU. This holds out the potential for electoral gain.

However, as Sunak will surely acknowledge, the next general election, likely in Autumn 2024, requires him to survive to that point. This is not certain.

Christopher 'Chopper' Hope, Associate Editor (Politics) for the *Telegraph* in his weekly newsletter to subscribers following PMQs believes that Sunak, who he describes more of a "president than a Prime Minister", continues to suffer having been selected by default rather than winning by being voted to become leader by Conservative members (2023).

As Hope explains, "I am told that as many as 160 Conservative MPs did not show up for last week's away day at a hotel in Windsor. Most of the guests who did show up were on the "payroll" whether as ministers, Parliamentary Private Secretaries, party vice-chairmen or trade envoys.

"Put another way – three times as many MPs stayed away as would be required to prompt a leadership contest this October, when the one year grace period when he cannot face a leadership challenge is over."

Only time will tell whether Sunak's good guy, bad guy routine proves successful.

What's desperately sad is that politics has reached the stage whereby the treatment of asylum seekers, frequently fleeing oppression and attempting to save their own lives as well as family, has become a political 'football' played for the purposes of electoral expediency by an individual with vast wealth whose own parents arrived as immigrants to this country.

Sunak's support for legislation to deal with the issue of refugees arriving in small boats cruelly emphasises the dreadful depth British politics has descended to.

It provides an unedifying portent of what the next general election is likely to consist of.

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