

## **Troubled Waters....**

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Unless the Conservatives under Rishi Sunak decide to go 'really long' by waiting until the end January 2025, the next general election will take place this year.

As reported recently, former Chancellor George Osborne claims his sources indicate it will be in Thursday 14th November (Stacey, 2024).

Sunak, who's been Prime Minister since predecessor Liz Truss's time in Number 10 ended so spectacularly following implementation of the now notorious 'mini budget' by her Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng, has struggled in asserting authority within his party.

As a consequence, Sunak's poll ratings indicate a great deal of dissatisfaction among Conservative Party members (Rayner, 2024). This is reflected in predictions of the outcome of the next general election.

On Wednesday polling organisation Savanta publishes its latest polls showing that Labour on 44% are 17 points ahead of the Conservatives who are on 27%.

On Monday, as the Telegraph reported in an eye-catching headline, 'Tories facing 1997-style general election wipeout', polling carried out by YouGov of 14,000 people suggests the Conservatives will win only 169 seats a loss of 196 compared to the outcome of the general election held in December 2019 (Rayner, 2024a).

YouGov predict that the Labour Party is likely to win 385 seats. This would give it a majority of 120 which, in the immediate aftermath of the last election, when the party under then leader Jeremy Corbyn, and suffered its worst result since 1935, seemed inconceivable within five years.

Sunak's problem it seems is exacerbated by the fact he's not popular among members who believe him to have cynically been involved in bringing down 'Heineken politician', Boris Johnson, who, it should be remembered, in promising to achieve what his predecessor could not, fulfilling the will of those who voted to leave the EU in the referendum held eight years ago this June, delivered an 80-seat majority.

Brexit, whilst unlikely to be toxic an issue as it was during the 2016 referendum and general elections in 2017 and 2019, still casts its shadow over British politics, most particularly in relation to the matter of immigration, an outcome it's believed many who voted to leave the EU thought would occur.

The reality is somewhat different to the claim that 'taking back control' would secure the UK's borders.

Reduction of immigration into the UK, especially by those arriving by 'small boats' across the English Channel, is an objective Sunak has dedicated a great deal to achieving. Significantly, in early January last year Sunak made dealing with 'small boats' one of his five key pledges (Gov, 2023).

As a direct result, the 'Rwanda plan', formed in cooperation with then Home Secretary Suella Braverman, led to the Illegal Migration Act which would allow the detention and removal of anyone arriving in the UK "illegally" to Rwanda or another "safe" third country (BBC, 2023).

What Sunak has discovered is that this pledge and everything that flows from it is producing criticism from all parts of the political system including, the right of his own party who argue it doesn't go far enough in dealing sufficiently quickly with those who arrive in this country without permission.

Migration Watch UK on their website states, the number of people arriving in this country by small boats last year was 29,437 (2024).

The cost of housing those arriving without permission, and who, until a decision is taken about whether they are allowed to remain in the country, must be provided with accommodation is not insignificant.

The latest estimate of dealing with those awaiting a decision on their ability to remain in the UK – almost 137,000 according to the latest available data published by the government (Gov, 2023a) – is according to the Home Office least £8 million a day, almost £3 billion annually (Syal, 2023).

However, as many of Sunak's critics assert, dealing with those arriving by 'small boats' should be judged in comparison to the latest net migration figure – those legally allowed to enter the UK minus those who leave – which currently stands at 745,000 for 2022 (BBC, 2023a).

Former PM David Cameron, now Foreign Secretary, pledged in 2010 to reduce net migration to lower than 100,000.

Which brings us back to Brexit.

Cameron as leader of what was a coalition government with the Liberal Democrats announced in 2014 his party's intention to include a manifesto promise at the next election to hold a referendum on continued membership of the EU.

As we know, the result of the referendum, that the UK should leave the EU, was not what Cameron wanted to occur.

Crucially, Cameron hoped to achieve endorsement for the country remaining in the EU as a way of dealing with the threat posed by the UK Independence Party (UKIP) which, as well as attracting support of Eurosceptic Tories, was successfully marshalling support of former Labour voters in constituencies in the north of England who believed that membership, including the commitment to free movement of labour, had allowed those from 'elsewhere' to take their jobs.

UKIP, then led by Nigel Farage, though still in existence, has been overtaken in popularity by Reform UK led by Richard Tice. Notably, Farage is its Honorary President.

Reform UK represents a very significant threat to the Conservative Party.

Avowedly right wing in inclination, Reform UK campaigns for much tougher anti-immigration legislation.

Peter Walker, the Guardian's deputy political editor, analyses the contention made by the Telegraph in its reporting of the YouGov election prediction that unless the Conservative Party responds to Reform UK's policies, it's likely to lose 96 seats as a consequence of MPs' votes in these seats being split(2024). Walker's view is that this represents the "difference between a catastrophic loss and a hung parliament".

'Borrowing' Reform UK's policies, particularly on immigration, is shared by former Brexit Secretary David (now Lord) Frost who was responsible for overseeing UK negotiations of the current Trade and Cooperation with the EU that's proved, many assert, utterly devastating to this country's economy.

Lord Frost in writing 'If the Tories don't act, there will soon only be smoking rubble left', offers an opinion piece in the Telegraph to complement reporting of the YouGov poll(2024).

Frost is unequivocal in his belief that the only way the Conservative Party led by Sunak can avoid a drubbing at the next general election is to be far more radical on the issue of immigration “legal as well as illegal” (ibid):

“There is only one way to rescue the position and bring back those 2019 voters who have left us. It is to be as tough as it takes on immigration, reverse the debilitating increases in tax, end the renewables tax on energy costs – and much more.

“It is to set out a vision for why Conservative Britain will be different to the immigration-boosting, Brexit-undermining, taxing, spending, regulating, nannying, hectoring nightmare that Labour will bring. And it is to stop doing all those things ourselves.”

On Tuesday, MPs voted on amendments to toughen up the Illegal Migration Act proposed by former immigration minister Robert Jenrick, who resigned in protest at Sunak’s approach on sending refugees to Rwanda, as well as by veteran Eurosceptic Bill Cash.

That 60 Conservative MPs including former home secretary Suella Braverman, Jenrick as well as former PM Liz Truss, along with dozens of others on the right wing of the party supported the amendments may have been anticipated.

However, that deputy chairs Lee Anderson and Brendan Clarke-Smith, both acknowledged as ‘red wall’ advocates, resigned rather than support the government has sent shockwaves through the party and further undermines Sunak’s authority (Mason, 2024).

Though the bill was passed with a majority of 44 on Wednesday evening in Parliament, Sunak still faces considerable opposition from what Sam Francis, of the BBC calls the ‘five families’, a reference to Italian American mafia crime organisations in New York and consisting of the European Research Group, New Conservatives, Common Sense Group, Northern Research Group and Conservative Growth Group (2024).

The next stage for the Illegal Migration Act is to go to the Lords where it’s likely to face opposition from all parties including Conservative Peers. It’s entirely possible the bill may be sent back to the Commons for further amendments.

Collectively, MPs on the right of his party will continue to savagely criticise Sunak on the issue of Immigration.

The forthcoming general election will be played out against a background of continuing Conservative internal division and, as spring and summer results in warmer temperatures and, on certain days, calmer waters in the English Channel, increased number of refugees will arrive by small boats.

Consequently, Sunak, whatever he does is going to experience opprobrium from within his own party as well as from other political parties who see the use of immigration as an election stratagem as being both distasteful and its reprehensible.

For Sunak, immigration, as continued membership of the EU did for previous Conservative leaders, will undoubtedly prove to be troubled waters indeed.

Steven's latest chapter, 'Boris Johnson, the green shopping trolley', was recently published in *Toxic News? Covering Climate Change*, edited by Mair, Ryley and Beck and published by Bite-Sized Books, London

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