

A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall – The Inexcusable State of British Politics

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The scenes of chaos exhibited in Parliament last week may be considered to be another consequence of the ongoing conflict in Gaza.

Hamas' murderous attack last October, in which 1,139 people died, including 36 children and causing dreadful injuries to many hundreds of others (France 24, 2013), was always going to elicit reaction from Israel.

Appallingly, the death toll of Gazans is now in excess of 30,000, assuming numbers killed in the West Bank are included, over 7,000 are missing and 70,000 injured, some terribly (Aljazeera News, 2024).

According to the Hamas controlled health ministry in Gaza, around 70 percent of victims are woman and children (Lederer, 2024).

The United Nations believe more than a half million people in Gaza are starving (*ibid*).

This has created concern across the world Palestinians are enduring what many regard as a disproportionate level of suffering due to Israel's military intervention.

This has led to intense debate about how an bring an end to the maelstrom of violence.

Many governments, most particularly Joe Biden's administration in America, have attempted to exert influence on the Israeli government to allow a cessation in military operations allowing Gazans at least temporary respite from the conflict and to receive desperately needed humanitarian aid.

This was the crux of the vote last week in Parliament.

In allowing MPs in Parliament a vote on an SNP 'opposition day' motion calling for an "immediate" cease-fire in Gaza, what in fact transpired was shambolic and led to a walkout in protest by SNP and Conservative MPs (McDonald, 2024).

As Politico reports on its website, believing Commons Speaker Lindsay Hoyle had allowed Labour to table its own motion also calling for a ceasefire, but containing wording containing "softer language on Israel's conduct in the war" than the SNP's, there was anger at what was seen to be deliberate manipulation of Parliamentary conventions.

It had been anticipated that the SNP's motion containing the words "collective punishment" of the Palestinian people was highly problematic for Labour, most particularly its leader.

Keir Starmer was aware that supporting the SNP motion would mean his party would be seen to accuse Israel of engaging in action that is prohibited by the 1949 Geneva Convention; war crimes.

Whilst many human rights organisations claim this to be the case (Human Rights Watch, 2024), and The United Nations has stated its view that there is "already clear evidence that war crimes may have been committed" by both Hamas and the Israeli military, and is gathering evidence for potential prosecutions, no cases have yet been brought (McGreal, 2024).

Consequently, as influential political commentator Robert Peston explained in a piece for the ITV's News website last Tuesday, Labour, in proactively attempting to avoid needing to instruct

its MPs not to vote for the SNP's motion, instead proposed an amendment calling for a ceasefire in Gaza "almost identical", but without accusing Israel of "the collective punishment of the Palestinian people" (2024).

A number of Labour MPs have expressed concern that they are under pressure to demonstrate commitment to providing support for beleaguered Palestinians.

Hoyle in allowing Labour's alternative motion created the anger that led to last week's walkout and calls for him to be stripped of his role for having deliberately deviated from parliamentary convention (Geiger, 2024).

Significantly, Hoyle's has been criticised by the Commons most senior official, Clerk Tom Goldsmith.

The government, having proposed its own motion, should, under long standing principle meant Labour's would not be put to a vote.

However, following a meeting between Labour's leader and the Speaker, Hoyle decided the Commons would vote first on Labour's amendment followed by further votes on the SNP's original motion and then the government proposal for an "immediate humanitarian pause".

The walkout by MPs meant that Labour's motion was agreed on a nod rather than a formal vote.

Anger was expressed by the SNP and some Conservative MPs who assert Hoyle acquiesced with Starmer's request to avoid potential embarrassment if his MPs ignored the 'three-line whip' (formal instruction), not to support the SNP motion.

Commons Leader Penny Mordaunt claimed Hoyle had "undermined the confidence" of the House.

Anger at Hoyle's action has not been assuaged by him having returned to the chamber to explain his decision and apologising for having tried to "do the right thing".

Last week's controversy comes as there's growing tension and toxicity spawned by Hamas' actions last October.

Dreadfully, reports of antisemitic and Islamophobic attacks have spiked Monetta (2024) .

Matters have not been assisted by the intemperate language of some politicians.

Notably, former deputy chairman Lee Anderson claimed "Islamists" were in control of London mayor Sadiq Khan (Grunewald, 2024).

Having been suspended by his party over the weekend, meaning he cannot stand as its candidate at the next election unless lifted, Anderson has refused to apologise (*ibid*).

Significantly, former Home Secretary Suella Braverman, dismissed by Sunak in his cabinet reshuffle last November, and believed to be positioning herself as a leadership contender should the Conservatives lose badly, is believed to think the PM's decision to withdraw the whip from Anderson was an overreaction and publicly described the reaction to his comments as "hysteria" (Dathan, 2024).

Perhaps aware of rumours Anderson may defect to Reform, fast becoming the nemesis of a Conservative Party seen by members as insufficiently right-wing under its current leader, Rishi

Sunak, Sunak is decidedly restrained in his condemnation of the man he appointed to appeal to 'red wall voters'.

Though stating his belief his former deputy chairman's comments were "wrong", Sunak denied there were "Islamophobic tendencies" in the party (Bush, 2024).

Sunak would appear to prefer Anderson to remain within the Conservative Party.

Sunak will be aware there's a growing sense within his own party that many members share some of the views expressed by Anderson and believe their party should lurch ever more to the right (Gutteridge, 2024).

The PM's situation has not been made any easier for by comments from former London minister Paul Scully who, during a discussion concerning allegations of anti-Muslim sentiments within the party, claimed there are "no-go areas" in Birmingham [Sparkhill] and east London [Tower Hamlets] (Badshah, 2024).

Scully, it should be stressed, has apologised for these remarks.

As described in my last blog, Starmer has his own internal difficulties in that many of his MPs possess a traditional inclination to side with the Palestinian side (McCabe, 2024).

Starmer's dilemma is in ensuring prospective MPs do not let anger at the way Palestinians in Gaza are being treated become antipathy towards Jews in general that may be regarded as antisemitism.

What's apparent is the current environment in politics, which was undermined under the premiership of Johnson, have become increasingly acrimonious.

Both parties contain factions that leaders attempt to keep in check in order to achieve/maintain power.

In the case of the Tories right wingers, having achieved dominance, when not criticising Labour, now seem intent on attacking each other.

Rafael Behr in a passionately argued article, 'Islamophobia and antisemitism in UK politics have a grim, exhausting symmetry', contends that politics in this country is operating in a "relentless polarising vortex" is using both Jews and Muslims in order to create "a dangerous round of mutual antagonism" (2024).

His conclusion, Behr exudes the sense of being utterly exasperated:

"...we are tired, I am tired, of having personal identity, family attachment, culture and innermost anxiety scored and folded into darts for other people to hurl across party lines." (*ibid*)

Meanwhile issues such as cost of living and dealing with existential threats such as global warming and the ever-developing menace, Russian President Putin and his expansionism are in danger of being forgotten in what's perceived by the public to be pathetic posturing by MPs at Westminster.

Having learned from what worked for Johnson and Trump, some, particularly politicians on the right, are far too willing to say what they believe will achieve short-term political gain within particular parts of the electorate.

Ominously, as Marina Hyde puts it, "the era of displacement populism is upon us" (2024).

Last week's events in Westminster merely underpin the belief of casual observers of Parliament that it's dysfunctional and does not truly represent their priorities.

This is dangerous and, as the negative consequences of the vote to leave the EU continue to demonstrate, disillusionment can manifest itself in ways that are difficult to contemplate.

Robert Shrimmsley in his *FT* column 'The price of not policing the Tories' paranoid frontier', stresses the need for the Conservatives to "recognise the dangers posed by those who accelerate the paranoid and sectarian views that can fuel violence" (2024).

It's a dreadful indictment of the current poisonous political environment when, because of the serious threat of violence some MPs face because of their stance on the Israel-Gaza conflict, the government believe it necessary to announce a £31 million package of security measures to "protect the UK's democratic processes from disruption" (Morton, 2024).

The title of one of my favourite tracks by The Strangers, released in 1977, 'Something Better Change' is apposite.

If our politicians need some inspiration, I'd suggest the biography written by former minister, Tory Party leadership contender Rory Stewart, *Politics on the Edge* published last year.

Stewart, expelled from his party by Boris Johnson for refusing to back his belief that this country could leave the EU without suffering economic and social consequences, is something of a maverick but comes with a pedigree developed through wonderfully eclectic experience, including being a deputy governor of an Iraqi province.

Stewart's views are as honest as they are trenchant.

Anthony Phillips reviewing the book for *Church Times* contends Stewart "exposes the glaring inadequacies of the dysfunctional way in which Britain is governed" (2023).

Sadly, I acknowledge, it's extremely hard to envisage anything dramatic changing.

Instead, I fear, we should prepare ourselves for a general election campaign as nasty that held in December 2019 when voters were told they'd enjoy a more prosperous future by voting Conservative to 'Get Brexit Done'.

Wouldn't it would be good to truly believe that this time, things really will get better?

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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