



By: *Harvey Morris*

Early UK election more likely as Sunak reshuffle fails to heal ruling party rifts



As Rishi Sunak's political allies were dispatched this week to talk up the benefits of the British prime minister's latest cabinet reshuffle, his enemies in the ruling Conservative party were already plotting his downfall.

In an exercise akin to rearranging the deckchairs on the doomed Titanic, Sunak used the sacking of his rebellious home secretary, Suella Braverman, as the occasion to juggle most of his top team.

Reaction to the changes, much of it negative, raised a number of possibilities, ranging from Sunak's replacement to an early election, perhaps next spring.

What looked unlikely to change was the ruling party's poor showing in opinion polls that point to an opposition Labour party victory.

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Billed at the outset by one Sunak ally as a move to "strengthen the team", the reshuffle was within 24 hours looking more like an act of weakness and desperation.

That was a perception fuelled by Sunak's decision to raise former prime minister David Cameron from the political graveyard to serve as foreign secretary.

The newly ennobled Lord Cameron is best remembered for the political miscalculations that led to an unforced referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, and for quitting in ignominy when he lost the vote.

The man portrayed by Sunak's spokespeople as an elder statesman with a hotline to all the world's leaders was dismissed on reshuffle day by The Economist magazine as one of the country's worst prime ministers.

Whatever history's eventual judgment on Cameron's political legacy, in the short term his appointment is like a red rag to a bull to

Conservative right-wingers. Within hours, the first of them dispatched a letter of no confidence in Sunak amid predictions of a full-scale Conservative civil war.

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That is a conflict in which most of the electorate would serve as bemused bystanders, increasingly unable to link their day-to-day concerns with the antics of the ruling party at Westminster.

As former Conservative MP Paul Goodman put it in an article for Conservative Home: "Out there in the real world, which has other priorities than the Westminster Village, household incomes are expected to fall again."

Given the revolving-door appointments of recent years, with some ministers' tenures counted not just months but days, most voters know little and care less about all but the most headline-grabbing individuals who were recycled on Monday.

For many voters, the changes at the top are a further signal that, rather than taking the path of renewal, the current Conservative government has already reached the end of the road.

The motivating factor for Sunak's changing of the guard, earlier than he might otherwise have chosen, was the open defiance of Braverman.

Accused, even by party colleagues, of offensive and divisive language on issues from immigration to homelessness, her spat with London's police force proved the final straw.

Her view that the police had gone soft on pro-Palestinian demonstrators and other "woke" activists pretty much aligned with that of the prime minister. Her real crime was to pose an eventual leadership threat to him as the favourite of the Conservative right.

After a period of reflection, some might say dithering, Sunak decided that it was preferable to have his potential rival outside rather than inside the cabinet tent.

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Braverman's parliamentary backers now have the opportunity to mount a leadership challenge on her behalf, although it is doubtful whether they are yet numerous enough to force a vote.

Leadership in the current circumstances could turn out to be a poisoned chalice if it meant leading the party to a near-inevitable election defeat.

There is little evidence that a Braverman premiership rather than a Sunak one would avert that outcome. That would be to confuse populism with popularity.

A snap post-reshuffle poll suggested a majority of voters, Conservatives included, thought Sunak was right to sack her.

If the prime minister manages to remain in office unchallenged, he is running out of options after a lack-lustre speech at the party conference in October in which he cast himself as the "change candidate", a difficult sell after 13 years of Conservative rule.

This week's contentious reshuffle may turn out to have been a last throw of the dice to avert electoral defeat by presenting a more centrist image to woo the floating voter.

The party's right-wingers are already gleefully dismissing that as a tactic doomed to failure. Former minister Jacob Rees-Mogg, criticising both Braverman's sacking and Cameron's appointment, suggested that any sitting Conservative MP elected on less than a 10,000 vote majority in 2019 might be looking for a new job.

Their redundancy might come earlier than anticipated if Sunak opts for a spring election. If his reshuffle fails to revive his party's fortunes, he might decide it is better to take an electoral gamble rather than wait for internal divisions to make its prospects even worse.