



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK Conservatives running out of time and options to reverse polling decline



Britain's 'natural party of government', as the ruling Conservatives are wont to regard themselves, picked a bad time to have a meltdown.

In an ominous prelude to what was already shaping up to be prime minister Rishi Sunak's most challenging week in office, Britain's favourite polling guru predicted the party could be headed for the worst electoral defeat in its history.

And, in a timely warning that went largely unheeded this week, Professor Sir John Curtice also **said** that party divisions over immigration policy were only making matters worse.

Come Monday morning and a motley of factions were gathered behind closed doors to plot whether to scupper Sunak's latest Rwanda asylum plan, either because it was too harsh or not harsh enough.

By the time of Wednesday's initial vote on the measure, both sides backed off rejecting his bill which passed with a majority of 44. Sunak is off the hook for now but still faces further rebellions as the legislation moves to the next stages in parliament.

Humiliating defeat

The centrist One Nation group reluctantly backed Sunak, despite its misgivings that the Rwanda plan virtually scraps any protection in the courts for asylum seekers wanting to challenge deportation to the African state.

The group seemed partly motivated by a desire to avoid yet another Conservative leadership challenge that would further damage the party. Its chairman, Damian Green, said anyone who sought to challenge the prime minister's leadership at this stage was "mad, malicious, or both".

Even if Sunak survives until the next election, however, it may be merely to preside over the party's humiliating defeat

Even if Sunak survives until the next election, however, it may be merely to preside over the party's humiliating defeat.

Writing in the Conservative-supporting Telegraph at the weekend, John Curtice said that, if voting intentions stay as they are until the next election, the party would be lucky to win 200 seats in the 650-seat House of Commons.

In a worst case scenario, he judged that the total could be as low as 130, down from the 365 Boris Johnson secured in 2019.

Such an outcome might herald the fracturing of a party that has served in office or in coalition for two-thirds of the time since the dawn of the 20th century.

But how did Sunak's party get into its current doom loop?

Sunak's dilemma

Curtice, professor of politics at Strathclyde University, suggested that the public appeared to have stopped listening to what the Conservatives had to say.

An alternative explanation would be that it is the Conservatives who have stopped listening to the public, otherwise they might not be tearing themselves apart over immigration legislation that most voters say is of secondary importance to them.

After 13 years in power, they may have lost the knack of judging the temperament of the broad electorate that no amount of focus on immigration will resolve.

Shortly after **Robert Jenrick quit** as immigration minister because of his

opposition to the Sunak's Rwanda asylum plan, he claimed the government would face the "red hot fury of the public" if it failed to solve the immigration question.

Jenrick should know that most of the British electorate do not really do "red hot fury", generally preferring a resigned grumpiness with which to express their discontent.

One of Jenrick's constituents was perhaps nearer the mark when she told their local newspaper: "I think I am a little bit tired of them being like children and throwing tantrums instead of actually sitting down and discussing things in the correct way."

Sunak's dilemma is that, whatever modest achievements he might claim for his first year in office, he has failed to chip away at the opposition Labour party's solid polling lead.

Polls show most voters are either skeptical or unimpressed by his performance on the key pledges of halving inflation, promoting growth and cutting debt, and are outright dismissive of any progress on reducing queues for national health treatment.

All the prime minister has left is to fulfill an elusive pledge to "stop the boats" in which success would have to be set against his record of presiding over record levels of legal migration.

As bad luck would have it, Sunak had to spend the day before his bill came before parliament being grilled by the Covid inquiry on his role as chancellor in responding to the pandemic. The inquiry has already provided the public with ample reminders of why they might not want to vote the Conservatives back.

Pre-election panic

So what's in store for the natural party of government, if Professor Curtice's worst case scenario becomes a reality within the next year?

Predictions of its demise would almost

certainly be premature. It has been winning, and occasionally losing elections since the 1830s. Some were already tempted to write its obituary after Labour's Tony Blair swept to power in 1997.

A rump of Conservative survivors might be tempted to move a defeated party further towards the populist right, a red line for their more centrist colleagues

A rump of Conservative survivors might be tempted to move a defeated party further towards the populist right, a red line for their more centrist colleagues.

Already, amid pre-election panic, some backbenchers were reported to be fantasising about the return of Boris Johnson, with or without the support of Nigel Farage, founder of the former Brexit party and just back from a TV celebrity jaunt in a Australian jungle.

More likely, a chastened Conservative party will revert to a well-tried strategy of ruthlessly imposing internal party discipline while offering right of centre moderation after the turmoil of the post-Brexit years.

As for the more histrionic voices that came to the fore since the epic battles over Europe, even veteran Conservative colleagues are whispering that a spell in opposition might do them good.