



By: *Harvey Morris*

An alien's guide to British politics



Outside observers, trying to get a grip on weeks of political turmoil unfolding in Britain, would be forgiven for believing that what they usually regard as a staid and sensible nation is teetering on the societal brink.

As MPs cower in their safe rooms, sinister alien gangs reportedly control the streets, while the impotent police stand idly by. Entire neighbourhoods, we are told, have become no-go areas for the average citizen. And, with parliament seemingly in chaos, the prime minister intervenes to warn that democracy itself is under threat.

The dystopian vision evoked by recent headlines is at odds with the experience of most Britons. Their attention, depending on their inclination, is currently divided between concern for health of the Royal family and speculation over what fiscal crumbs might be scattered by the Chancellor in his budget this week.

Far from the country suffering a collective trauma, the current nervous breakdown is almost exclusively confined to the political classes where the stress of a forthcoming election is clearly starting to take its toll.

The intimidating incidents

When Prime Minister Rishi Sunak unexpectedly stepped out into Downing Street last Friday to **address the nation**, there was widespread speculation - call it wishful thinking - that he might be about to announce an early election date.

Instead, he used the 10-minute speech to denounce "a shocking increase in extremist disruption and criminality" whose ultimate target was democracy itself.

He rightly condemned the intimidating incidents of anti-semitism and Islamophobia that have marred some of the protests arising from events in Gaza, while neglecting to acknowledge the role of some in his own party for fuelling the latter.

The figurative ink was barely dry on a recent **article I penned** on the left's continuing problems with anti-Semitism when the attention switched to the right's problem with Islamophobia.

Conservative right-winger and former party deputy chairman Lee Anderson **had accused** London's Muslim mayor of surrendering the capital city to his Islamist mates.

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Although Anderson was swiftly suspended from the party, no such sanction has been applied to Suella Braverman, the former home secretary, for claiming in the same week that Islamists were now in control of Britain.

Even a moderate Conservative, Paul Scully, appeared to have caught the bug when he bought into an old far-right trope by claiming parts of London and Birmingham with large Muslim populations had become no-go areas.

The best put-down came from fellow Conservative Andy Street, the West Midlands mayor, who retorted: "The idea that Birmingham has a 'no-go' zone is news to me...I for one am proud to lead the most diverse place in Britain."

Scully apologised and escaped the consequences of his folly.

Cause for concern

The issue gained traction, however, with the by-election victory in the northern town of Rochdale of radical blowhard George Galloway, who had pitched a fiercely pro-Palestinian manifesto at its Muslim minority.

In his Friday speech, Sunak depicted Galloway's win as further blow to British democracy, effectively tarring those who

voted for him with the same brush.

A veteran Stalinist rabble rouser and apologist for dictators, including the late Saddam Hussein, Galloway benefitted from the Labour Party's decision to withdraw support for its own candidate over perceived anti-semitic remarks that were enthusiastically exploited by the Conservatives.

There is indeed cause for concern about the degree of extremist intolerance generated in Britain by events in the Middle East. The abuse and threats directed at MPs, particularly women, on this and other issues, is troubling for politicians and voters alike.

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However, free speech advocates claim that another insidious threat to the country's democratic traditions comes from the government itself. Sunak's response to the perceived threat from extremists was to announce he would put further pressure on the police to crack down on demonstrations.

The human rights organisation Liberty hit back this week, accusing the government of having already given sweeping powers to the police to arrest people who take to the streets for causes they believe in.

According to its policy chief, Ruth Ehrlich: "Now more than ever it is vital we bring people together. But Sunak's deliberately divisive and dangerous rhetoric will simply have the opposite effect."

Struggles for the soul of the Conservative party

Sunak's get-tough message is clearly aimed at appeasing rivals on the radical right. This increasingly noisy fringe includes the likes of the newly defrocked Anderson and Nigel

Farage, the Brexit party founder who, the day after Sunak's doorstep speech, was jocularly toying with BBC listeners over his possible future leadership of the Conservative party.

The problem for any Conservative leader is that the views of such outliers reflect those of the bulk of the rank-and-file membership, all 170,000 of them. These are the same people who voted Sunak's predecessor Liz Truss into her inglorious 44 days in office in 2022.



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A **new poll** commissioned by Hope Not Hate, which monitors the extreme right, found that 58 per cent of Conservative party members believed Islam posed a threat to the British way of life, almost double the result for the overall public.

Nick Lowles, the head of Hope Not Hate, said the poll found the views of party members had shifted to the right on a variety of issues, including immigration, multiculturalism and climate change.

Our overseas friends should perhaps be assured that what is being portrayed as a national meltdown is actually yet another of a succession of struggles for the soul of the Conservative party.

And, by the way, should they be planning a visit, they can also rest assured that there are no no-go areas in Britain.