



By: *Harvey Morris*

UK Conservatives opt for small state, anti-woke ideologue to confront ruling Labour



The title of Leader of His Majesty's Most Loyal Opposition is surely one of the most hollow and delusive in the British political lexicon.

It implies a spirit of goodwill and consensus towards the national good, virtues notably absent from the confrontational rough and tumble of the modern House of Commons.

That is unlikely to change with the appointment of the latest titleholder. Enter stage right Kemi Badenoch, the proudly abrasive culture warrior chosen this week to lead the Conservative Party after the worst election **defeat** in its history.

Faced with the choice between Badenoch and the faux rightist Robert Jenrick, a relatively late adopter of anti-immigrant rhetoric and other populist right motifs, a narrow majority of party members decided to go for the real thing.

Her elevation might be viewed as one more episode in the elusive search for the soul of the Conservative Party, now reduced to just 121 members in the 650-seat lower house.

But in the bigger political picture does it really matter who leads the runner-up party in a parliament dominated by the Labour election victor with its 403 seats? With a cast-iron majority and a five-year term theoretically guaranteed, what does Keir Starmer's ruling party have to fear?

Hard truths

At a time when Starmer's team is already struggling to sell aspects of its economic programme, Badenoch will likely use her new platform in the Commons and the media to promote her own view that an overbearing, left-leaning bureaucratic elite is to blame for the country's ills.

Her status as the first black woman to lead a major UK party may offer her some leeway in continuing to promote what she regards as hard truths on immigration and identity politics.

The cosy convention is that the official opposition exists to hold the government of the day to account, keeping it honest by exposing flaws in its legislative agenda on behalf of the electorate.

The more evident reality is that the prime role of the opposition is to promote its own interests while undermining those in government with a view to replacing them at the earliest opportunity.

"We're not going to be able to oppose anything in terms of getting legislation through" - Kemi Badenoch

Erskine May, the bible of parliamentary procedure, gives the game away. It **states** that modern party discipline, in which MPs are instructed which way to vote by their respective whips, tends to reduce the effectiveness of a direct attack on government in the House of Commons.

Rather than influencing legislation, "the criticism of the Opposition is primarily directed towards the electorate, with a view to the next election, or with the aim of influencing government policy through the pressure of public opinion."

Badenoch herself **concedes**: "We have very few MPs. We're not going to be able to oppose anything in terms of getting legislation through."

So far, so predictable

She kicked off her leadership win with an inevitable swipe at Labour's "painful decisions" budget, dismissing what she regards as Chancellor Rachel Reeves' policy of tax, borrow and spend.

So far, so predictable. But what does the new Conservative standard bearer and darling of the party's right actually propose? Nothing less, apparently, than the dismantling of a

pernicious, left-leaning bureaucratic class that has allegedly stifled private enterprise, in part through its constant intervention on behalf of protecting marginalised and vulnerable groups.

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It is all set out in *Conservatism in Crisis: Rise of the Bureaucratic Class*, a pamphlet Badenoch launched in late September. To reverse a trend in which the manifesto says the previous Conservative government was complicit, it was necessary to:

“Ditch radical environmental politics, unpick identity politics, focus on a strong positive national identity, limit migration...focus on bringing down the cost of the welfare state and much more.”

Either the Conservative Party gets its act together or it risks being replaced by a new right wing alternative, the document warns in a nod to the insurgent Reform party that secured five parliamentary seats in the July election.

The battle for the soul of the Conservative Party

Her small state, anti-woke agenda may reverberate with a dwindling hard core of the party's grassroots membership who have not already decamped to Reform. It is at odds, however, with surviving centrist Conservative MPs.

Three former cabinet ministers, including former leadership frontrunner James Cleverly, have ruled themselves out of joining her shadow cabinet. In the run-up to the leadership vote, the centrist One Nation Conservatives of the Tory Reform Group **announced** they would not back either Badenoch or Jenrick.



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“Both have used rhetoric and focused on issues which are far and away from the Party at its best, let alone the One Nation values we cherish and uphold,” the group stated.

The centrists may be keeping their powder dry until such time as Badenoch's leadership stumbles. Clearly the battle for the soul of the Conservative Party is not over yet.

The challenge for the Labour government is to stay on course and not be diverted by a strident and populist Conservative leadership which will want to shift the focus of the political debate.

Starmer won a decisive but somewhat lukewarm victory. A skeptical public might have to wait a while longer for positive results. Labour strategists are already looking to a second term to fulfil promises of economic renewal.

Given unresolved tensions within the Conservative Party, it is far from certain that Badenoch will be the one to lead it into the next election.