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BY DEEPAK TRIPATHI

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After Brexit: the State of the United Kingdom



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Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's Conservative Party in the United Kingdom suffered serious setbacks in three byelections on July 20, 2023. In Selby and Ainsty in northern England, the main opposition Labour Party overturned a Conservative majority of more than 20,000 to win the seat by some 4,000 votes. The Labour winner was Keir Mather, who at 25 years of age became the youngest MP in the House of Commons. In the southern English constituency of Somerton and Frome, the Liberal Democrat candidate Sarah Dyke overturned a 19,000 Conservative majority and won by an even larger margin of 11,000 votes. And in Uxbridge and South Ruislip in Greater London, former prime minister Boris Johnson's constituency, the governing party's candidate Steve Tuckwell barely held on to the seat, winning by fewer than 500 votes.

These results came against the background of nationwide opinion polls showing the governing Tories 15 percent or more behind the Labour opposition. Only four years before, Boris Johnson had steered the Conservatives to an 80-seat majority in the 2019 general elections, promising to “Get Brexit Done.” Now Johnson stands guilty of contempt for lying to Parliament in an investigation by the House of Commons Privileges Committee with a majority of his own party. Johnson resigned as the report was about to be published. It was an astonishing fall from grace for a leader who the admiring millions thought could do no wrong.

Much as Prime Minister Sunak and his government continue to celebrate the success of the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union, the people are not impressed. Leaving the EU that surrounds the United Kingdom has caused friction in trade with the block. The COVID pandemic hit the country hard. After Russia’s war on Ukraine and high energy prices, the cost of living for most British people has reached crisis proportions, worse than in other industrialized countries. The British economy is stagnating, barely avoiding a recession by its official definition. Inflation and interest rates have been rising, so are food and energy prices, forcing some consumers to cut back or use their dwindling savings.

Hundreds of thousands of workers from other European countries have gone home, or moved to other countries. There are shortages of doctors, nurses, care workers, builders and fruit pickers. Economic stagnation is keeping domestic unemployment around 4 percent – a figure which the government boasts about. But it conceals the fact that these jobless figures do not include people who are no longer seeking work due to age or illness. Many have simply given up.

The UK’s national borrowing exceeds the size of the whole economy. Local authorities find themselves in serious financial difficulties, and some have gone bankrupt. The national infrastructure, including roads, is in a state of disrepair. Potholes are to be seen everywhere. Police are stretched to deal with crime. Railways, medical services, schools and colleges have been hit by frequent strikes. Amid the discontent, Sunak and his ministers continue to resort to standard populist rhetoric, blaming the strikers for acting against “the people.” The style of communication used by Donald Trump and other Republican politicians in America is copied by populists in Britain. Conservative politicians talk of waging a “war on woke” and on those who do not have “British values” – without adequate explanation of what those values are supposed to be.

With the next general elections expected sometime by late 2024, campaigning is, in effect, under way, and it is getting dirtier. The *Times* of London recently ran a story that Sunak will increasingly resort to “divide and rule” election tactics. Already, the target included issues of immigration and the “boat people” – asylum seekers undertaking a dangerous journey across the English Channel from France to arrive on the southern English coast. The implementation of net zero emission strategy is at risk. The latest tactic is Rishi Sunak’s announcement that he plans to restrict the number of students allowed to go to university for what he describes as “Micky Mouse degrees” that are low value in terms of earning capacity. Sunak insists that a university education is “not the only way to succeed in life.” This after his previous announcement that he was looking at plans to ensure that all pupils in England study maths until the age of 18, because he wanted people to “feel confident” when it came to finances. Critics say his plan would require more maths teachers, and not every pupil has the aptitude to learn the subject.

Some context is needed to try to understand Prime Minister Sunak’s particular mindset. Sunak was first educated at Winchester College, one of the most expensive schools in the country. After that, he went to Oxford University, where he earned a degree in philosophy, politics and economics. He then went to Stanford University in California for an MBA. At Stanford, he met his future wife, whose billionaire father, N. R. Narayana Murthy, is the founder of the technology firm Infosys, in which Sunak’s wife has a stake. Sunak himself had a successful career at the investment bank Goldman Sachs before entering politics. The American business magazine *Forbes* estimates that “Sunak and his wife are worth roughly \$810 million – more than a quarter of a billion dollars richer than the \$500 million personal fortune of King Charles III.”

Sunak is reluctant to talk about the couple’s wealth, especially that of his wife, who, he says, is a private citizen. However, it is difficult in a democracy to completely separate a political leader’s life from their spouse. Such public scrutiny is legitimate and unavoidable in the United States, the United Kingdom, or any Western democracy. Their policies and practices have a context; an important part of it is their successes or lack of them, and their particular preferences.

One cannot be certain exactly what lies behind Sunak’s interventions particularly in public education. But among the consequences, intended or not, could well be a radical social restructuring that would lead to a shrinking university educated population, and an expansion of the workforce without higher education and those with lower skills. A university degree is not only about money. It fills needs that require advance investigative

and analytical skills. We all learn at different speeds. There are numerous examples of individuals who, unlike Sunak, were slow in their early years, but showed extraordinary achievements in education in later life. One rigid formula for all would deprive many people from underprivileged backgrounds of life opportunities, and kill their desire to learn in their own time and at their own pace.

*Deepak Tripathi, PhD, is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland. He blogs at [Reflections](#). Among his latest books are *Modern Populism: Weaponizing for Power and Influence* (Springer Nature, September 2023) and *Afghanistan and the Vietnam Syndrome: Comparing US and Soviet Wars* (also Springer Nature, March 2023).*

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