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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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29.02.2024

Chaos in the Mother of Parliaments



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The so-called “mother of parliaments” in London is currently in over-drive generating a plethora of responses to widespread dysfunction, ranging from side-splitting guffaws to a weary cynicism to tears and a deep sadness (depending on who you are).

The context for these responses is the total collapse of the Conservative Party as potential winner of the forthcoming general election. Beset by factional infighting, the Tories have for months been around a consistent 20 points behind the opposition Labour Party in the opinion polls.

Every move by the Tory government seems to emerge from a crisis while precipitating another crisis in turn. It is no exaggeration to say that the Tories are a government in name only.

One parliamentary farce centered on the vote for a motion calling for a ceasefire in the Israel-Gaza conflict. The motion was proposed by the Scottish National Party (SNP), with the clear aim of making even more prominent the split between Labour's pro-Zionist leader Keir Starmer (who had refused steadfastly to call for a ceasefire) and Labour MPs and town and city councilors in areas with significant Muslim electorates overwhelmingly in favor of a ceasefire.

In Walsall, 8 councilors who resigned from Labour over the issue in November are threatening to up their own candidate against Labour at the general election.

Eleven Labour councillors in Burnley resigned from the party in November, 10 resigned in Oxford, and 8 quit in Blackburn. This month two Labour councilors resigned in Kirklees, Yorkshire, and there has been a steady stream of others.

Starmer, a technocratic opportunist with no visible political convictions while entirely reliant on focus groups for his declared (pro tem) positions— “misspoke” initially when he said Israel had the right to turn off water and electricity for Gazans after the October 7 Hamas attack, and took his time before shifting his position to a call for meaningless “humanitarian pauses” in Israel's relentless slaughter.

The SNP ceasefire motion created an obvious problem for Starmer, now faced with splits at every level of his party.

Parliamentary procedure decreed that the original motion would be debated, as well as a Tory government motion designed to water down the SNP motion by calling for a “humanitarian pause”.

Starmer, to save his skin, then tabled a Labour motion identical to the SNP motion, which the Speaker Lindsay Hoyle (who is a Labour MP), chose for debate in addition to the other motions, in a clear breach of parliamentary procedure, which required only the SNP motion and the government amendment to be put up for debate. When Hoyle announced his decision chaos ensued as SNP and Tory MPs walked out of the chamber. Hoyle said he allowed Labour's motion in order to protect MPs (presumably Labour?) from threats to their safety over the vote. Despite his two apologies Hoyle's breach of parliamentary convention prompted 63 SNP and Tory MPs to sign a motion of no confidence in the Speaker.

The Speaker survived because a sufficient number of MPs gave Hoyle the benefit of the doubt over the question of the threat to MPs— the Labour MP Jo Cox was murdered by a rightwinger in 2016 and the Tory MP David Amess in 2021 by an Islamist.

The SNP announced that it would try to reintroduce the ceasefire motion this week, this time including a call for arms sales to Israel to be frozen. It will be interesting to see how the Speaker and Starmer respond.

Starmer's troubles extend beyond the chamber of the House of Commons. Also this week is a by-election in Rochdale—with a population that is 30% Muslim— in the north-west of England following the death of its Labour MP Tony Lloyd.

Labour chose a Lancashire county councilor, Azhar Ali, as its candidate. The rightwing tabloid *Daily Mail* then released a recording in which Ali suggested at a meeting that Israel allowed the October 7 attacks to go ahead, so that it could retaliate by attacking Gaza “in self-defense”. Ali apologized for his comments, but following the disclosure of other similar comments made by Ali, Labour withdrew its support for him, and ceased to campaign on his behalf. Ali can still stand in the election, but will sit as an independent if elected.

Two former Labour MPs are also standing in this election. George Galloway, a strong supporter of the Palestinian people and critic of Starmer, is standing for the Workers Party of Britain. Simon Danczuk was selected as the candidate for the rightwing Reform UK. Danczuk was the Labour MP for Rochdale in 2010-2015, but was suspended from the party after it emerged he had been sexting with a 17-year-old girl. Danczuk said he is standing as an “old Labour” candidate, and would focus on local issues, rather than on what he describes as Starmer's “woke” politics, or the conflict in Gaza. Starmer would be the loser no matter who got elected.

Meanwhile, the Tories faced a mess of their own.

The Conservative MP and former deputy chair of the party, Lee Anderson, said Islamists had “got control of London” and that its Labour mayor, Sadiq Khan had “given our capital city away to his [Islamist] mates”. Anderson refused to apologize for his comments, and was suspended from the party.

The former Tory home secretary/interior minister, Suella Braverman, then said that “Islamist cranks and leftwing extremists” had taken control of the UK's streets as part of a leftwing agenda. Starmer sought a respite from his travails by calling on the Tory party to purge its ranks of Islamophobes. Braverman and Anderson belong to their party's rightwing, which has been putting prime minister Rishi Sunak under pressure after a series

of catastrophic by-election defeats. The Tory right is fearful of losing votes to the far-right Reform UK, regardless of the fact that it would be electoral suicide for the Tories to move even further to the right. Sunak though is too weak to bring his rabble-resembling rightwing into line.

The “mother of parliaments”? Do Brits laugh or cry?

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CounterPunch 28.02.024