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Britain

# Writing on the wall for Sunak and Starmer

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**This article analyses recent political developments in the UK, including election setbacks for the Conservatives, turmoil within Labour over the Israel-Palestine conflict, and the rise of far right parties. Hearse argues that these trends point to a period of increased political polarisation and conflict in Britain after the next general election.**

Events last week (October 16–21) not only highlighted the turmoil in British politics but some fundamental trends as well. The Tories suffered drastic by-election defeats; Rishi Sunak rushed to Israel to repeat Joe Biden's pledge of abject loyalty; Keir Starmer was left spluttering over Gaza as Muslim councillors rebelled [1] and Chancellor Jeremy Hunt let it be known—unofficially—that he would not stand in the next election. What does it all mean?

New factors that potentially threaten Keir Starmer's road to Number 10 are the rise of a mass movement in solidarity with Gaza, which saw hundreds of thousands on the streets of London on 21 October; the rebellion of dozens of Muslim Labour councillors, some of whom have resigned the party whip; and the significant rise in support for Reform UK, the continuity Brexit Party, registering 6-8% in some polls.

On the ongoing catastrophe in Gaza, Labour spokespeople started saying, 'We are very clear that Israel has the right to defend itself.' A few days later, they joined Joe Biden and Rishi Sunak in calling for Israel to admit emergency humanitarian aid and 'respect international law'. This obviously evades the issue of Israel's bombing campaign and the slaughter of thousands of civilians in a society where 50% of them are children. Talking transparent rubbish will not prevent a revolt among Labour's Muslim base, voters, and councillors.

As we discuss below, this is not a special one-off case. The unravelling of Labour's political support among wide sections of workers is inevitable in the next period, irrespective of how many votes it gets in a general election. The danger is that before and especially after the general election, forces of the radical right could gain a base among disillusioned voters.

Rishi Sunak has the biggest problems, however. The by-election results in Tamworth and South Bedfordshire, with swings of 20%+ to Labour, threaten the Tories with a meltdown. According to one poll of voting intentions [2], if a general election were held today, Labour would win more than 400 seats, while the Conservatives would reach only 118. In this poll, the Liberal Democrats would get 29 seats and the Greens just one. Schadenfreude at the Tories' electoral distress should not disguise the fact that Britain's undemocratic electoral system is likely to hardly register mass votes for the Greens and Reform UK. But such votes could have an effect on the outcome nonetheless.

Many Tory MPs appear to think that defeat is inevitable, and the apparent decision by Jeremy Hunt to resign as an MP is highly significant. According to the Observer, Hunt fears a 'Portillo moment', the humiliating event in the 1997 general election when Tory minister Michael Portillo saw a 20,000 majority in Enfield collapse, a moment that finished his political career. [3]

As an ex-Chancellor and ex-Health Minister, Jeremy Hunt would see endless vistas of highly paid directorships open up, perhaps in investment banks and private health companies, the latter thanking him for his great work allowing private investment into the NHS. For sure, he will earn enough to avoid having to go to a food bank, languish on an NHS waiting list, or keep his heating turned off in the winter.

On the day of the two by-elections, Rishi Sunak did a Boris [4] and fled the country, dashing to Israel, where he

outraged Joe Biden's total support for the Gaza blockade and military assault with the statement 'we hope you win'.

Like Joe Biden's visit, there was an obvious electoral motivation for his trip. Britain's Jewish community is small but highly motivated, with overwhelming support for Israel. But for Labour, there is one electoral statistic that is ominous: Jewish voters are a majority in just two constituencies, and Muslim voters are a majority in 36.

The central political operation, as far as Labour is concerned, is Keir Starmer's attempt to win power by saying little and promising nothing. In particular, Starmer:

- Refuses to cancel the Rosebank oil field or promise any substantial policies with radical net zero outcomes.
- Refuses to pledge any major increase in financial support for the NHS, care homes, and other public services.
- Refuses to promise decent pay for public services.
- Refuses to promise a big programme to build social housing;
- Refuses to promise any major increase in taxes on the rich, energy companies, and multinational corporations that hide their profits in foreign bank accounts [\[5\]](#)
- Refuses to promise to repeal reactionary Tory legislation like the Police, Crime, and Sentencing Act and the Public Order Act, which between them give substantial new powers to the police to ban demonstrations and arrest people for the mildest acts of civil disobedience.

No wonder many people now see no point in voting for Labour. More outrageously, Starmer and his key lieutenants refuse to say they will repeal Conservative policy on immigration, merely criticising the Tories for failing to deal with the asylum appeals backlog and making no guarantee of safe routes for asylum seekers themselves.

Already, Labour's failure to support more than a year of strikes among NHS staff, rail workers, teachers, and university staff has caused widespread disillusion and has caused numerous former Labour loyalists to say they won't support Labour at the next election. Regrettably, there is no viable left-wing electoral alternative to Labour, and one is unlikely to emerge before an election in 2024.

Reform UK is the continuity Brexit Party, effectively the same thing. Unlike Labour, it disdains concealing its electoral pledges, which revolve around tax cuts, climate change scepticism, and 'net zero immigration'. Reform UK is saying that Brexit wasn't done properly. Nigel Farage has been ramping up his public appearances, and in the run-up to the general election, he will likely resume his position as leading spokesperson for Reform UK.

Even if Reform UK gets 6–8% of the vote, nobody can predict exactly the effect that would have on the election outcome. If Reform UK got a big vote in the former Red Wall seats in the North and Midlands, that could result in capsizing existing Tory majorities. There are just too many variables to make exact predictions. One of the key ones is the number of abstentions. A low turnout played an important role in the Tory defeats in Telford and South Bedfordshire. It is quite possible that a higher proportion of previously Tory voters can be mobilised for the general election, but most Tory MPs appear not to be expecting such an outcome. Unnamed ministerial sources told *The Guardian* that defeat was inevitable.

Reform The UK appears to have a credible programme for government, but it is, in reality, nonsense. They propose addressing the cost of living crisis by taking many lower-paid workers out of income tax bands. This is counterposed by wage increases. But they refuse to say anything about taxes on big businesses, particularly oil and gas companies. Net-zero immigration will be enforced by sending immigrants back to France. Or wherever they came from.

The one Tory policy leak of the week was the idea of reducing taxes for the top five million wage earners, about 13

percent of the workforce, those earning over £50,000 a year. (The fact that many top earners have income in the form of benefits not declared and income placed into bank accounts in tax havens like Jersey distorts this figure.) People in this top tax bracket—over £80,000 a year—are repeatedly complaining they can't manage and need tax relief. See [this insightful article](#).

The outcome of the general election in Scotland is also a potential danger for Starmer. Labour won the October 5 Rutherglen and Hamilton by-election, doubling its Scottish Westminster representation, but this was on top of scandals in the Scottish National Party, which forced the resignation of Nicola Sturgeon as SNP leader and the resignation of two of its MPs.

On the basis of this, some observers were predicting a Labour turnaround to win 20 seats at the general election. But the turnout in this by-election was only 37%, hardly a ringing endorsement for Labour, despite 59% of the votes cast. In this situation of disillusion with all the main parties, no one can exactly predict the outcome in Scotland, but some polls have said the SNP will lose half its seats to Labour [6].

What about the right wing of the Conservative Party and the left of Labour?

The Labour left at a parliamentary level is a busted flush, with a parliamentary critical resolution on Gaza relying on SNP MPs and Green MP Caroline MP to get its sponsors passed the 20 mark. The Labour conference was a totally controlled Starmer rally. The fundamental process at work that Starmerism has brought is one of squeezing every possible space for the Labour left to exist and participate.

The cold hands of the Labour machine have had a deadening effect at the constituency level as well. In the past, the right-wing hated the Bevanite Tribune group and the Bennite left-wing. But their legitimacy as components of Labour was not challenged. Since the defeat of Corbynism, left opposition is not legitimate and can be excluded from the party or the PLP by a flick of Keir Starmer's little finger. Corbynism in the Labour Party is not coming back, at least not in our lifetimes. And Jeremy Corbyn himself refuses to make any substantial move to organise a combative new left formation.

On the right, there is plotting and desperation. And it is easy to see why. Gone are the days when most Tory MPs had well-paid professional jobs that they pursued in the morning. The £88,000 a year MP salary plus maybe £50,000 a year expenses is a big incentive when most, unlike Jeremy Hunt and Rishi Sunak, are unable to achieve fabulous wealth outside parliament.

Most likely, the Tories will lose their majority, and Sunak will depart. Then there will be a brawl between different right-wing factions, with Suella Braverman by far the candidate most likely to win the leadership on a radical right-wing programme, foreshadowed by her policies as Home Secretary, much more like Donald Trump and Italian neo-fascist premier Giorgia Meloni than Boris Johnson. Harsh repression against democratic rights, brutal repression against trade unions, and against immigration will be the centre of Tory hard-right politics. Topped off with climate change scepticism

Alternative right-wing candidates like Priti Patel will be plotted against for being too pro-Boris and not, amazingly, right wing enough. For sure, the Tory right's plotter in chief, Wycombe MP Steve Baker, will be at the centre of trying to move the parliamentary Conservative Party even further to the right. Another ingredient in the reactionary right wing soup is Annunziata Rees-Mogg, sister of Jacob and one of the most prominent leaders in Reform UK, after their star Nigel Farage. For sure, the Rees-Mogg dinner parties will include a party discourse about what happens if the Tories suffer a big collapse.

But in the light of likely mass disillusion with a Keir Starmer government, not only is there a missing Labour left with mass support, but there is also the absence of a credible left party capable of acting as an alternative to the Starmer leadership and all its works. This is a really tragic situation.

Demonstrations on October 21 in solidarity with Gaza saw a massive 300,000 in London and tens of thousands around the country. For the first time since 2023, an anti-imperialist demonstration had a high proportion of young people—many students, but importantly, many from Muslim communities and people with family links to Gaza. We have entered a world of not only climate collapse but permanent imperialist war, as demonstrated in Gaza and Ukraine [7]. Building a broad left party, as all international experience shows, requires a core network of revolutionary anti-capitalist cadres; otherwise, the danger of reformist capitulation and collapse is immense.

So these are the alternative possible perspectives for Britain after the general election:

- The Tories win another term in office, which would open up a carnival of reaction with a very nasty cohort of right-wing Tory MPs. This would be a government with many similarities to the Meloni government in Italy. But a new Tory government is highly unlikely.
- A minority Labour government with issue-by-issue support from the LibDems and SNP. This would likely lead to the replacement of Rishi Sunak with Suella Braverman and Reform UK, or associated fascist groups, running rampant in the streets. Labour would then blame its inability to do anything progressive on its lack of a parliamentary majority.
- A majority Labour government besieged by the right, as above, blames its incapacity to do anything substantial to help the working class and the poor on the dire financial situation it inherited from the Tories. Exactly how the radical right would recompose is a matter of speculation. Paul Mason says that the Tories could unravel, creating a major space for semi-fascist politics, and that we should hope the Tories remain strong enough to contain the radical right. The problem with this idea is that the Tories are already drifting to the radical right [8]

Any of these scenarios means a quickening of the basic conflicts in British politics. Each stage of these processes would expose the lack of a credible socialist, environmentalist, and feminist alternative. The debate on how socialists need to organise should be opened now, not after a general election next year. There is an important responsibility here. The need for socialist and left-wing unity is immense. Otherwise, the dangerous forces of the radical right will outflank and out-recruit us.

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[1] <https://socialistworker.co.uk/features/resist-and-rebel-the-face-of-the-pro-palestine-movement/>.

[2] There are numerous online poll sites that show similar figures eg <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/oct/01/poll-spells-trouble-for-rishi-sunak-as-voters-who-lent-votes-look-to-take-them-back>

[3] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/oct/21/jeremy-hunt-set-to-quit-as-mp-in-fear-of-a-portillo-moment>.

[4] Boris Johnson as foreign minister once found it necessary to go to Sri Lanka to avoid a vote on Brexit under Theresa May.

[5] Billionaires should face a minimum tax rate, according to a report which found some of the world's mega-wealthy are paying little to no tax. The EU Tax Observatory said most people pay a higher rate than the super-rich, who, it said, are able to use complex business structures for avoidance. It suggested a minimum 2% tax rate on billionaires' global wealth would raise \$250bn (£205bn) a year. There are around 2,500 billionaires with a combined wealth of \$13 trillion.

The report by EU Tax Observatory, part of the Paris School of Economics, examined how successful efforts to ensure individuals and companies pay their fair share have been over the past 10 years. It said that the automatic sharing of the wealthy's account information across more than 100 countries had significantly reduced offshore tax evasion. However, billionaires are able to get away with paying tax rates equal to 0% or 0.5% of their wealth "due to the frequent use of shell companies to avoid income taxation", it said.

Meanwhile, while the report commended an agreement in 2021 between 140 different countries to make sure companies pay at least 15% in corporation tax, it said that the plan had been "dramatically weakened" since then by a "growing list of loopholes". See

<https://www.bbc.com/news/business-67191791>.

[6] <https://www.politico.eu/article/scottish-national-party-lose-half-seats-labour-2024-poll>

[7] Russia's intervention in Ukraine is of course an act of imperialist aggression

[8] [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/10/05/british-conservatives-drift-to-the-radical-right\\_6149040\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/10/05/british-conservatives-drift-to-the-radical-right_6149040_4.html).