

Sunak survives Rwanda deportation Bill rebellion but lurch to the right continues

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The factional warfare in the Conservative Party over the Rwanda deportation Bill saw the party's extreme right-wing again set the agenda of British politics.

The Bill passed its second reading Tuesday evening by 313 votes to 269. This means that a majority of the Tory party's right-wing factions, collectively making up 100 MPs, voted with the government. Of the 38 Conservative MPs who did not vote, intentional abstentions, as recommended by the European Research Group, were somewhere in the 20s.

A majority government's legislation has only ever been defeated at such an early stage of its passage through the House of Commons once since the start of the 20th century—the Shops Bill in 1986, over an inconsequential issue.

That this was being discussed as a possibility yesterday is a measure of the weakness of Sunak's position, sitting atop a fractious party fearing electoral oblivion. A defeat would possibly have precipitated his downfall and an early general election. But in the end the Tory right were not prepared to administer such a self-inflicted wound, in part because they anticipate Sunak making various amendments to placate them before a third reading, likely in January.

Sunak has therefore at best postponed a crisis, given that the demands of his right wing are opposed by an equal number of Tory MPs.

The legislation is intended to finally make the government's plans to deport failed asylum seekers to Rwanda a reality, overcoming the objections of the Supreme Court, which last month ruled the policy illegal under domestic and international law. Its text declares Rwanda a "safe country" by government fiat, removes the duty of public authorities not to act in a way which is incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), and of the UK courts to "take account of" relevant cases of the European Court of Human

Rights (ECtHR), and allows ministers to ignore temporary injunctions issued by the ECtHR.

The brutality of the UK's asylum policy was underscored Tuesday afternoon with the reported death of an asylum seeker, a suspected suicide, lodged on the prison ship the Bibby Stockholm—housing 500 people.

The groups representing the Tory right-wing, dubbed the "five families" in reference to the Italian American mafia, want Sunak to go further and effectively abandon the European Court and Convention altogether, removing even the right of individuals to appeal to these bodies based on exceptional personal circumstances.

A "star chamber" convened by the European Research Group (ERG) of Tory MPs published a legal commentary on the Bill Monday which argued, "Experience to date in cases about attempted removal of illegal migrants to Rwanda demonstrated that individual challenges are likely to be numerous, and that they have had a high rate of success," before calling for "significant amendments".

The government's legal analysis notes that the proposed changes "would mean ministers accepting that those unfit to fly, for example those in the late stages of pregnancy, or sufferers of very rare medical conditions that could not be cared for in Rwanda, could be removed with no right to judicial scrutiny."

It insists that 99.5 percent of legal challenges would be denied under its scheme.

Sunak and government whips spent the last two days in what an insider called a "belated, panicked and intense" effort to secure the Bill's passage, with Sunak stating that he is open to "tightening up" the legislation.

The One Nation group of "moderate" Tories, the largest single faction in the party, comprising more than 100 Conservative MPs, is concerned that the more flagrant illegality being called for will jeopardise crucial international relations and worsen the UK's post-Brexit isolation.

Tory MP Natalie Elphicke emphasised in Tuesday's debate that diplomatic work needed to be done to get France's support policing the Channel, arguing that refugees should be deported to France rather than Rwanda. Most importantly, senior White House officials have made clear the Biden administration's concern that severing the UK's connection with the ECHR would undermine the Good Friday Agreement for Northern Ireland, in which it is heavily invested.

Sections of the Tory right are reportedly still prepared to force yet another leadership election, in which they hope to instal one of their own as prime minister. The *Mail on Sunday* recounts that members are planning an "advent calendar of shit" to destabilise his premiership. Former Home Secretary Suella Braverman already martyred herself in November in preparation for such a challenge—her departing letter focussed heavily on Sunak's "betrayal" of pledges to "stop the boats" carrying asylum seekers across the Channel.

On Sunday, immigration minister Robert Jenrick resigned, saying the Bill he was supposed to be leading through the Commons "does not go far enough".

The ERG was the central force behind Boris Johnson's ouster of Theresa May and the implementation of a "hard Brexit".

There is even talk of Johnson returning as party leader and prime minister, which would first require him to regain a seat in the House of Commons through a stage-managed byelection. The *Mail* suggests a "'dream ticket' leadership tie-up with [former UKIP and Brexit Party leader] Nigel Farage is even being considered".

There is a great deal of speculation involved in all these scenarios, with Sunak's supporters telling the media off the record that the right wing has proved again that it doesn't have the numbers. Changing leaders before a general election the party is expected to lose badly would in any event present Sunak's successor with a poisoned chalice. Johnson is making far too much money outside parliament to be likely to be tempted to lead the party into failure.

But for the return of this political criminal alongside Farage to even be suggested is an indication of the sharp lurch to the right being engineered within British politics. A violently xenophobic, nationalist, draconian cabal of Tory MPs is still calling the shots.

It can do so thanks entirely to the political cover provided by the Labour Party, which has done nothing to tip the despised Tory government out of office, instead fashioning itself as an identically right-wing replacement.

While Sunak was holding emergency breakfast meetings with his rebels, Starmer gave a speech at Silverstone insisting, "We do all want to stop the boats," denouncing the government for "losing control of our borders." Securing borders and "protecting your country," he went on, "is the basics."

Labour's opposition to the Rwanda scheme, he said, is purely on the basis that "It isn't going to work." Starmer referred to his own "experience of breaking gangs" of people smugglers and lamented how money paid to Rwanda "could have been used to bolster our cross-border force."

Asked if he felt the Rwanda schemes was "morally wrong", Starmer replied, "I don't think it will work. I think it's very expensive."

Asked if he was opposed in principle to offshoring asylum claims, Starmer replied, "There are various schemes around the world where individuals are processed, often en route...elsewhere... That's a different kind of scheme and I'll look at any scheme."

The ruling class is increasingly convinced by Starmer's performance. Several major Tory donors have now fallen in behind the Labour Party. On Tuesday morning, the Tory house paper the *Daily Telegraph* published an editorial on Starmer more advisory than condemnatory, taglined "Parts of the Labour Party do not appear to see a problem with mass migration. How will Sir Keir Starmer deal with this?"

In his Silverstone speech, Starmer insisted that the party had "fundamentally changed" under his leadership and that "If you want a government committed to economic stability, the rule of law, good public services, restoring Britain's standing, making family life more secure and putting the country first, this is what a changed Labour party will deliver."



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