

UK Conservative government in meltdown as plotting intensifies to remove Sunak

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Britain's Conservative government has been wracked by leadership plots, scandals and the defection of one of its MPs, Lee Anderson, to the far-right-Reform UK party.

Prime Minister Rishi Sunak has been in office for less than 18 months. He entered Downing Street on the say so of a few hundred Tory MPs during a party leadership contest. At that time he was the third Tory prime minister in the space of seven weeks, following the resignation of Boris Johnson over the COVID "Partygate" scandal and then Liz Truss, elected by a few tens of thousands of Tory Party members, who remained in power for just 44 days.

Sunak's Tories trail the Labour Party by around 20 points, with forecasts regularly made of a wipeout in the general election to be held later this year.

Talk of another leadership election, previously described by most Tory MPs as political "suicide", has been growing. Sky News reported Sunday, "As misery and despair stalk the Tory party, talk of changing leader is getting louder"; the BBC on Monday, "Mood among Tory MPs darkens as Rishi Sunak faces leadership questions".

Sunak's allies were forced to brief *The Times* Monday morning that "he would be prepared to call a general election if rebels force a leadership contest... People should be careful what they wish for."

Shadow cabinet minister Penny Mordaunt is the first named potential challenger, as a front for a further shift to the right. On Sunday, the *Daily Telegraph* Tory house newspaper recalled, "In 1990, a 'stalking horse' challenge by Sir Anthony Meyer led to the leadership election of 1990 that brought about Margaret Thatcher's downfall. Since then, the rules have changed so that such a candidate cannot simply trigger a contest themselves with a handful of backers."

It added, "In this case, it is being claimed that some MPs on the Right of the party are pledging support for Ms Mordaunt so that she effectively becomes a 'stalking horse' candidate behind whom MPs across the party felt they could unite, on the basis that many centrist MPs may not wish to back potential candidates such as [Business Secretary] Mrs [Kemi] Badenoch and Suella Braverman."

Former defence secretary Ben Wallace, one of 60 Tory MPs stepping down at the next election, responded by declaring with a despairing statement that it was too late to replace Sunak. He told Times Radio, "There comes a moment in time in the electoral cycle where you effectively put on your best suit, you stand up and you march towards the sound of the guns and you get on with it."

Sunak's crisis intensified last week when it emerged that the Tories' leading-donor Frank Hester—a businessman who has given the party £10 million in total and was reportedly set to hand over another £5 million, or may have already done so, for this year's election campaign—had made a series of violently racist comments. In 2019, he said of black Labour MP Diane Abbott "you just want to hate all black women because she's there" and that she "should be shot".

With several senior Tories making excuses for Hester's vile comments, it took Downing Street an entire day to finally issue an apology through clenched teeth, with Sunak's spokesperson saying they were "racist and wrong" but that Hester "has now rightly apologized for the offence caused, and where remorse is shown it should be accepted."

Sunak had every reason for wanting to move on quickly. The *Guardian* reported Saturday that Hester is understood to have attended two Tory fundraisers in the last year, including in June when he was photographed

with the prime minister. The newspaper added, “The prime minister is also believed to have met Hester in Leeds, the day after the autumn statement in November, when the donor paid £16,000 for Sunak to take a helicopter to the city for a political visit.”

Hester has also had close dealings with current foreign secretary and former prime minister David Cameron, and current chancellor and former health secretary Jeremy Hunt.

Sunak was also minded to be cautious in responding to Hester’s comments as he is still in the middle of a backlash from the extreme right-wing of his party for suspending its deputy chairman Lee Anderson, who then defected to the Reform Party. Anderson had said on a live broadcast that “Islamists” had “got control of [Labour Mayor of London Sadiq] Khan [himself Muslim]... He’s actually given our capital city away to his mates.”

The MP was highly popular with the group of Brexiteer Tories who won a swathe of previously Labour-voting “Red Wall” seats in Boris Johnson’s 2019 election victory over Jeremy Corbyn. Reform, formerly Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party, campaigns as a more stalwartly anti-immigration, anti-“woke” alternative to the Tory Party and is polling between 10-14 percent, presenting a lethal threat to the Tories’ election chances.

Significantly, Johnson, who was forced out after Sunak stood down as his chancellor and has harboured a massive grudge since, is already out campaigning in these Red Wall seats. He is primed to do so in a general election with the demand that “the party should remind Red Wall voters of the key elements of the manifesto that won him a landslide five years ago, including his flagship [Brexit] policy,” according to the *i* newspaper.

Under conditions of seemingly irresolvable Tory meltdown, the ruling class is working closely with Sir Keir Starmer’s Labour Party to prepare a politically like-for-like replacement to rescue British capitalism, with less of the overt racism spewing forth from the government.

However, it should be noted that Anderson’s journey into the far-right political sewer started in the Labour Party. He was a longtime Labour member and councillor for the party. Formerly a miner in the Nottinghamshire coalfield, including during the 1984-85 strike, he was elected for Labour onto Ashfield

District Council in 2015. He quit to join the Tories in 2018, complaining that it had “been taken over by the hard left” under Corbyn’s leadership.

The Tories and Labour are entirely aligned on the fundamental issues of military spending—backing both NATO’s war against Russia in Ukraine and Israel’s genocide in Gaza—and continued austerity to make the working class pay for it. They are agreed on a further onslaught against democratic rights to enforce this agenda, with anti-war protest and opposition to genocide branded as “extremism”.

Rachel Reeves, Labour’s shadow chancellor, has been pledging for years that she will demonstrate “ironclad discipline” in restricting social spending. Last week, as Birmingham’s bankrupt Labour council imposed £300 million in spending cuts, and amid warnings that half of all councils face bankruptcy, Reeves refused to say that a Labour government would bail them out to protect vital services.

Speaking to Sky News’s Trevor Phillips she said, “I’m not going to be able to fix all the problems straightaway... I’m under no illusions about the scale of the challenge that I will inherit if I become chancellor later this year and I need to be honest with people.”

Workers must face up to the fact that, before the election and after, whatever the result, they face the same struggle against a joint Tory-Labour Party of austerity and war. There is an urgent necessity to build an alternative, socialist political leadership in the working class. This will be the perspective fought for by the Socialist Equality Party and its candidates in the general election.



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