

UK Tories elect Kemi Badenoch as leader in rightward lurch

Robert Stevens
3 November 2024

Kemi Badenoch was voted the new leader of the Conservative Party on Saturday following a vote by the party's membership. It presages a further shift to the right for this pro-austerity, militarist, national chauvinist party.

Badenoch, a former business secretary in Rishi Sunak's government, defeated ex-immigration minister Robert Jenrick by 53,806 votes to 41,388, taking 57 percent of the 70 percent of Tory members who voted.

The ballot was necessitated by the crushing defeat suffered by Sunak in July's general election. The Tories lost by a margin of 10 points, taking only a 23.7 percent vote share. Reflecting what was described as a "loveless landslide," Labour only received 33 percent, but owing to the UK's anti-democratic first-past-the-post electoral system, this translated into the Tories taking just 121 seats—the worst result in the party's history.

This decline was reflected in the 40,000 drop in members voting this time compared with the last Tory leadership contest in 2022 which saw the election of the short-lived Liz Truss.

Truss won 81,326 votes compared with the 53,806 votes for Badenoch.

The general election ended 14 years of Tory rule in which a deeply unpopular party staggered into ever worsening crises. This saw Britain's oldest bourgeois party forced to burn through an unprecedented five prime ministers—David Cameron, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Truss and Sunak—in just over six years from 2016 to 2022. Truss epitomised this, lasting just 41 days.

A day after Labour's win, Sunak resigned, initiating a near four-month leadership contest requiring several rounds of voting by Tory MPs to whittle the field of candidates down to two. The contenders Badenoch, Jenrick, former home secretary Priti Patel, Mel Stride, Tom Tugendhat and another ex-home secretary, James Cleverly, spent the summer seeking to outdo one another as to their right-wing credentials.

In putting forward their policies, the candidates were not just speaking to fellow Tory MP candidates and the party's

dwindling membership but to Nigel Farage's extreme-right Reform UK movement and its supporters. Over the last decade the Tories have haemorrhaged support to the various incarnations of Farage's anti-immigration, pro-capitalist party—the UK Independence Party, the Brexit Party, and now Reform UK. In the July election, Reform won over four million votes (the third-highest vote share at 14.3 percent), mainly at the expense of the Tories. However, due to first-past-the-post Reform won just five seats.

Over the summer, Reform continued to eat away at Tory support with the latest polls showing them getting within a few percentage points. One poll commissioned by the *Times* last month (data collected October 10-11), and with the leadership contest in full swing, showed Labour and the Tories tied on 27 percent and Reform on 21 percent.

Patel and Stride were eliminated in September, followed by Tugendhat and Cleverly after the party conference in Birmingham. Badenoch knew the mood of the party and arrived on the stage at the conference to say, after three of her rivals had just addressed conference delegates, "Nice speeches, boys, but I think you all know I'm the one everyone's been waiting for."

Badenoch shored up support among senior Tories, winning the endorsements of five MPs in the past fortnight, including two members of the shadow cabinet. By the time that members voted, she had the support of 13 other members of the shadow cabinet while Jenrick was backed by just three.

The daughter of Nigerian immigrants, Badenoch joined the Tory Party in 2005 and won a seat in the London Assembly in 2015. A supporter of Brexit, she became an MP for the safe seat of Saffron Walden in Essex at the 2017 general election, a year after the referendum to leave the European Union. She was handed a Treasury position in Johnson's government, and under Truss held the positions of Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade, as well as being appointed to the Privy Council—the body which advises the monarch of the day. Badenoch remained as Business Secretary in Sunak's administration.

Badenoch made few policy announcements, presenting

herself as the leading “anti-woke” candidate taking on a “progressive” left whose policies had wrecked the country. The Tories had lost the election because they “talked right and governed left,” she claimed. She would reverse Labour’s imposition of value added tax on private school fees and oppose gender-neutral toilets.

During the Tory conference she made several interventions denouncing “excessive tax ... excessive regulation and excessive government interference.” Citing the case of a local business owner in her constituency whose café closed, Badenoch said a minimum wage and maternity pay rules were among regulations “overburdening businesses.” After a media storm, she said she did not mean that maternity pay was “excessive” and that it was a good thing. No such retraction was made on the minimum wage.

Calling for cuts to the civil service, Badenoch was deliberately provocative, saying, “There’s about 5 to 10 percent of them who are very, very bad—you know, should be in prison bad—leaking official secrets, undermining their ministers, agitating.”

The shift Badenoch’s election seeks to engineer is made clear in the pamphlet her team released during the campaign, “Conservatism in Crisis: Rise of the Bureaucratic Class.” The introduction written by Badenoch stated of a parliament dominated by a Labour Party committed to austerity, war and attacks on democratic rights that the election had “delivered the most left-wing Parliament this country has ever seen.”

She complains, “In nearly every country, a new progressive ideology is on the rise. This ideology is based on the twin pillars of constant intervention on behalf of protecting marginalised, vulnerable groups, including protecting us from ourselves—and the idea that bureaucrats make better decisions than individuals, or even democratic nation states.

“[T]he new progressive ideology sees the nation state, and related migration controls, as a purveyor of historic injustice, not the fundamental necessities that they are.” Therefore, “we are uncomfortable with limiting migration on economic or cultural grounds, and the result is too many people coming here and placing strains on our economy and society.” This meant, “We risk holding back our economy and tearing apart the fabric of our society. The progressive left’s war on the nation state is a disaster for all of us and it must be ended.”

Her pamphlet states that what is required is not “misplaced nostalgia for the country of a hundred or fifty years ago,” but “a defence of our society now against the progressive threat.” The need was to “develop an agenda as radical as the Thatcher agenda was fifty years ago, the last real successful reinvention of Conservatism.”

With Badenoch the favourite to take over, Jenrick’s campaign was to ensure that he was able to influence events from a senior position within her leadership. He centred his fire on shifting the Tories policies towards capturing the Reform vote, calling for an annual cap on inward net migration at “tens of thousands.” The Tories would “never be in government again” unless they won back support lost to Reform and Jenrick would put Farage “out of business.”

As the Tories under previous home secretaries Priti Patel and Suella Braverman were not able—due to legal challenges—to implement a policy of deporting asylum seekers to Rwanda, Jenrick pledged to take Britain out of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) to “stand for our nation and our culture, our identity and our way of life.” He boasted that the UK’s “special forces are killing rather than capturing terrorists, because our lawyers tell us that if they’re caught, the European court will set them free.”

Jenrick advocated ramping up defence spending from its current 2.2 percent to 3 percent of GDP. He told the *Telegraph* this month, “Peace comes through strength. To deter a Russian invasion of Nato, we must spend 3 percent of GDP on defence and make that the new Nato standard for all member states.”

This positioned Jenrick well in the event of the election of Donald Trump as US president. He told the *Telegraph*, “We must prepare for an American pivot to the Indo-Pacific to contain China, which means the UK and Europe stepping up to defend against Russian belligerence. The age of freeloading has come to an end... We must wake up and urgently prepare for China to invade Taiwan within three years.”

Badenoch had complained that Jenrick’s insistence on leaving the ECHR “will divide our party. It will mean that the infighting and squabbling will continue. If we want to end the drama, we need to do this the right way.” There would instead “need to be a cap” on net immigration to prevent the “wrong people coming in” and “good people leaving.”

But aside from such minimal disputes, Badenoch said to Jenrick in her acceptance speech: “You and I know that we don’t disagree on very much. I have no doubt you have a key role to play in our party for many years to come.”



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact