

Britain's Conservatives Deserve to Lose



by Conrad Black

The election in the United Kingdom next week will mark another stumbled step in the descent of Britain into unprecedented political absurdity. It will bring in the sixth prime minister in eight years, a performance rivalling Third and Fourth Republic France, when General de Gaulle said that he often could not remember the name of the current head of the French government, so rapid was their turnover. (He was the only person in the history of France who served in cabinets in three different Republics.) The only time in British history when there has been such a frequent rotation of prime ministers was between 1827 and 1835, (Liverpool, Canning, Goderich, Wellington, Grey, Peel, and Melbourne, but Liverpool governed for 15 years, Grey for four, and Melbourne for six, and Canning died in office; all of them were statesmen of considerable or even great stature). The present cavalcade has

been a broadening shambles, unlike anything in modern British history. It is almost certain to continue, as there is no indication that the incoming prime minister, Keir Starmer, leader of the Labour Party, possesses what will be required to bring Britain out of this nosedive. The only leader in the history of the Labour Party capable of winning consecutive full terms in office was Tony Blair, and that was largely because Margaret Thatcher and John Major had left the country in such excellent condition. Starmer has no such good fortune and there is no indication that he possesses any comparable aptitude to govern.

This difficult period has been chiefly the consequence of Britain's inability to come to grips with the European issue, aggravated by the deep seated tradition of treachery and chicanery in the Conservative Party, (the last five p.m.'s have all been Conservatives). Britain in 1975 voted to approve entry into the European Economic Community, (common market). Without any consultation with the British public, the common market evolved into the European Union, gradually and stealthily, with the avowed goal of "an ever-closer Union," i.e. a federal state of Europe subsuming the sovereign power of its constituent national governments. Stark differences developed between factions of both the Conservative and Labour parties over European policy and the strongest peacetime British prime minister of the 20th century, Margaret Thatcher, the first British politician to lead a party to three consecutive full-term victories since before the First Reform Act in 1832, was pushed out of office by her own party, essentially because of differences over Europe. John Major succeeded her and was unable to resolve those differences and the succeeding Conservative leaders, William Hague, Iain Duncan-Smith, Michael Howard, all unsuccessful, and David Cameron, attempted to finesse the issue. Cameron was finally pushed into promising a new referendum which he thought he could win by a brinkmanship choice of question: remain in Europe as it steadily federates or leave altogether.

Cameron, a keen remainer, believed he could placate those minded to leave Europe by his promise to negotiate "full-on treaty change." But after arduous negotiations he came back from Brussels with less than Neville Chamberlain brought back from Munich in 1938. He won the right of the United Kingdom to vary social benefit levels but only with the approval of all the other 27 EU member states. As all the world knows, he lost the so-called Brexit referendum in 2016 by a narrow margin and honourably resigned at once. The real British problem with the EU was a lack of democracy. Unlike the French and Italians, who generally consider government to be a nuisance and don't feel very constrained to take most laws too seriously, or the Germans, who are accustomed to regimentation and are in any case the most influential country in Europe, the British like to be law-abiding but they like the laws to be sensible and democratically legislated. Once appointed, the Commissioners of Europe have practically unlimited power in their fields and are not subject to review by the European Parliament, which is a talking shop with more interpreters than members. Britain was not prepared to subordinate the system of government it had developed relatively peacefully over nearly a thousand years to the well-intentioned but fledgling and authoritarian bureaucracy in Brussels. Nor was it prepared to see its relations with the senior Commonwealth countries such as Canada and with the United States, subsumed into Brussels' relationships with those countries. (When, in 2003, in my capacity as a Conservative member of the House of Lords, I asked our leader in that house, Lord (Geoffrey) Howe, the former chancellor and foreign secretary, if we could not establish a House of Lords committee on foreign affairs, he stared at me as if I had two heads and said that all that had been delegated to the European relations committee.) The country wasn't buying it and the country was right.

The profound and almost equal division of British opinion between leaving Europe and remaining was aggravated by the tendency of the British Conservative Party to overthrow its

own leaders. The last British Conservative party leader who retired voluntarily in good physical and political health was Stanley Baldwin in 1937. Neville Chamberlain, Anthony Eden, Edward Heath, Margaret Thatcher, Iain Duncan Smith, Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and Liz Truss were sacked by their caucuses. Winston Churchill and Harold Macmillan were eased out, and Alec Douglas-Hume, John Major, William Hague, Michael Howard, David Cameron, (and very likely next week Rishi Sunak), quit after being defeated at the polls, before they could be dumped by their angry colleagues. British Tory backbenchers have no discernible loyalty to anyone.

Theresa May succeeded David Cameron but construed the Brexit vote as a mandate to claim to be leaving Europe while remaining within it – a formula that had no chance of success. Boris Johnson won a resounding electoral victory promising to slice the Gordian Knot and “Get Brexit done.” He did this well and managed the Ukraine war and the Covid response well, but ignored his own Covid regulations, severely affronting British conceptions of fair play, raised taxes, (which British Tories don’t do if they have any sense of self-preservation), and was caught, colder than a mackerel, in a distressing sequence of outright falsehoods. He immolated a great mandate and almost his entire government resigned underneath him. It was an implosion for the ages. Liz Truss came next, proposed a brilliant Thatcherite budget, but without a plausible plan for managing the resulting credit requirements, and she was given the high jump after a record breaking sprint in 10 Downing St. of 45 days. Sunak, with the followers of his four recent predecessors sitting behind him sharpening their knives, has also raised taxes, produced a hare-brained plan for sending illegal migrants to Rwanda, and is floundering to the polls six months early in an unsuccessful attempt to prevent the father of Brexit and leader of the new and unambiguously conservative Reform Party, Nigel Farage, from taking between 40 and 60 per cent of the habitual conservative vote. The result next week may well be the greatest electoral landslide

in British history. The Conservatives deserve the loss, but Labour is very undistinguished and does not deserve the victory and will have no idea what to do with it.

The long and farcical national nightmare will end: the Conservatives will rediscover conservatism, will absorb or merge with the Reform Party, will develop a serious plan to exploit Britain's independence of Europe, and will be back in government with a competent leader and excellent program in almost exactly four years. The intervening years will be thin gruel, but Britain has come through worse.

First published in the [*National Post*](#).