

SUNAK



by Ralph Berry

'UNITE OR DIE!' is Rishi Sunak's stark message to the Conservative Party. I thought at once of the old Jack Benny joke, who was notoriously mean. He is accosted by an armed robber. 'Your money or your life!' No answer. 'I said, "your money or your life!" 'I know, I heard. I'm thinking it over.' The Tories are thinking it over. They have of course no intention of uniting, whatever peril their party may be in. The Party may be in mortal danger, but there will always be individual survivors and those planning to retire. Many of them never wanted Sunak, as the leadership figures prove, and many will never forgive him for being the man who first stabbed Boris in the back. Those acquainted with JULIUS CAESAR will refer covertly to Casca ('Speak, hands, for me'), others will speak of 'the Markets' candidate', and the Left, more openly, of his Goldman Sachs record.

Sunak, well aware of the dangers, has stuffed his Cabinet with

members from the Truss administration. His call is for 'stability', a potent word which means 'please can I keep my job?' But many outside the tent have no job to keep. These homeless waifs will make trouble as soon as they can. For all, Louis XIV's complaint applies: 'Every time I make an appointment, I create a hundred malcontents and one ingrate.'

That is Sunak's fate. The Party itself must founder on the two visions before it. Liz Truss wanted a low-tax, high income, high productivity economy. Rishi Sunak wants, and has got, a high-tax low productivity model, the managed decline that has long been the goal—note the double meaning—of the system. He can sell this as long as the cheques come in for the beneficiaries. One more quotation: 'They are not long, the days of wine and roses.' The public is besotted with talk of a work-life balance, the right not to work at the office if you don't feel like it, and the joys of retirement at 55 or so with a pension that will cover travel to glamorous parts of the globe.

The new Chancellor of the Exchequer, Jeremy Hunt, has now looked at the books and doubtless blanched. He will have to cut out billions of spending pledges, perhaps 10% from each department. On Ukraine, his commitments are now less unsecured. Boris Johnson and Liz Truss were absolutist in their calls for a complete victory over Russia, no matter what the cost to the UK. Sunak now speaks of 'a terrible war that must be seen successfully to its conclusions.' That is a huge softening of the Johnson-Truss rhetoric and must point towards peace negotiations—and an easing of the UK's funding of the Ukraine war effort. Johnson now calls for a Marshall Plan that will take on the massive task of re-building Ukraine.

The Conservative civil war goes on, if muffled in the rejoicings of the Sunak coronation and the ritual banging of desks in the Conservative Committee Room. But the Commons should be posted 'Achtung Minen.' Truss has not gone away. She remains on the back benches, as does Boris Johnson. For

that matter, Theresa May makes up the triumvirate of former Prime Ministers.

None has any reason to be grateful to Sunak. And Kwasi Kwarteng remains, a formidable political force jettisoned from the Truss wreck and left to swim back.

He will. Sir Keith Starmer looks on with serene assurance at the end of 'the revolving door to chaos', his best phrase. His time will come, sooner rather than later. Sunak must rest on that sturdy friend of government, the passive voice. 'Mistakes were made. I'll fix them,' he cries, with the righteous accent of one denouncing error. And where was Sunak when these same errors were made?