

TODAY'S CONSERVATIVE PARTY: THE SPLIT BETWEEN CENTER-RIGHT AND FAR-RIGHT WAS VERY MUCH ON DISPLAY THIS WEEK IN MANCHESTER

I had not expected after conversations in Paris, Berlin and Vienna last week about the ascendancy of right-wing populist parties in continental Europe to find similar concerns in London. The conversations in London earlier this week took place against the backdrop of the disparate Tory tribes¹ having descended on Manchester for that annual British political fest – their party conference.

While views differ on what the outcome of the 2024 general election will be (which could be held in May or perhaps in October, but in any event by January 2025), there does seem to be a sense that if Labour does win in 2024, at the next general election, Labour will be facing off against a more populist, right-wing Conservative Party – a grouping that Guardian columnist Jonathan Freedland (“[I've got news for Rishi Sunak: He no longer leads the conservative party](#)”) suggests is now misnamed. It has become, he argues, *anything but* conservative. And incidentally, there is a school of thought that Labour could be a one-term government, and so this shift to the right has significant implications down the road.

But first, a few words about the party conference, where Rishi Sunak, who by most accounts has brought sanity and calm back to No 10 and expects to lead the party to a fifth successive term (yes, five more years on top of the 14 years of Tory rule by election day), made a play for unity. He did so in the face of a fractured and fractious parliamentary party whose more outspoken members are more interested in positioning

¹ Ben Quinn and Peter Walker, [writing](#) in the Guardian (“A guide to the key Conservative tribes as party conference looms”), map the following unofficial (and at times overlapping) groups of Tory MPs:

- free market ultras (also known as the Liz Truss nostalgic crowd) – there are a reported 60 MPs (equal in size to the Tory majority in the Commons) who have signed on to join Truss’ **Conservative Growth Group**, which calls for a cut in corporation tax, building 500,000 new homes and a resumption of fracking;
- Northern Tories representing former Labour “red wall” seats won over in 2019 by Boris Johnson, coming together as **New Conservatives**, led by MPs Danny Kruger and Miriam Cates;
- the **cultural warriors**, who include Suella Braverman and Kemi Badenoch, who were featured prominently at last May’s National Conservative (NatCon) conference (Boris Johnson stayed away from Manchester);
- the centrist **One-Nation Tories** led by Damian Green, who stand in opposition to the culture warriors and the free-market ultras and include those who lost the whip after rebelling over a looming no-deal Brexit and largely left the Commons in 2019;
- **China hawks**; and
- “**blue collar**” MPs from working class backgrounds.

themselves as Sunak’s successor and make little secret of their pessimistic views about the electoral fortunes of the party with Sunak at its helm.

The overall mood music reflects a palpable shift further to the right, and the conference will be remembered as much for what was said (or not said) in the main hall as was said on the fringes.

Manchester

This year’s Tory party conference was seen as a make-or-break opportunity for Sunak to show he and the Tories are still relevant and that a loss to Labour in the 2024 general election should not be seen as a foregone conclusion. This, however, flies in the face of party approval ratings as well as Sunak’s personal approval ratings, which have fallen significantly since he took over a year ago following the disastrous 49-day government of Liz Truss.²

There was, however, as Andrew Rawnsley chronicled in his October 1 commentary (“[The Tories meet plagued by their delusions, desperation and divisions](#)”), a second show going on in Manchester – “on the fringe,” where “competing factions of an ideologically splintered party will jostle for the attention of the media and their activists.” Sunak apparently declined to reshuffle his cabinet in September in order to keep the more extremist elements on the reservation (and off the fringe), but that did not constrain the rival factions from staking out their competing visions of where the party should be heading (and auditioning to be the next leader of the party). The crowds at the fringe events stood in marked contrast to the empty seats in the main hall during speeches by Cabinet members.

While there appears to be a consensus within the party that the party lacks direction, divergent themes were very much on display (and the attacks seem aimed more at these competing visions within the party than focused on the opposition): from those supporting net zero and remaining a part of international human rights conventions, to those opposing net zero and opposing remaining bound by international human rights conventions. For some, inheritance taxes should be scrapped, and income taxes cut. Growing voices on the more extremist end see their future riding on a wave of culture war battles.

As for that lack of direction, there was little talk of investment or productivity, the cost of living crisis, inflation, the housing shortage or the NHS. Instead, Sunak announced,

² According to the latest YouGov [poll](#) (September 21-22), Sunak’s net favorability rating is -45 (23% favorable, 63% unfavorable - his lowest score to date). Voting intention [polling](#) (September 26-27) puts the Tories at 24% and Labour at 45% (the prior week it was 27%-43%), and Keir Starmer leads Rishi Sunak on the question of who would make the best prime minister, 30% versus 22%. Incidentally, as against Liz Truss this time last year, Keir led Liz 44% to 14%. An Ipsos [poll](#) (September 6-12) found that 86% believe Britain needs a “fresh team of leaders,” which is six point higher than in May and 10 points higher than in March 2010 (shortly before the Tories unseated Labour).

during his [address](#) to the conference in which he mentioned “change” thirty times, that the northern leg of HS2 (the ambitious high speed rail line connecting cities in the north of England with London and representing both the most significant infrastructure project in decades and an investment in the future growth of Britain) would be scrapped. This was particularly awkward since one of the principal beneficiaries of HS2 would have been Manchester, not to mention that the slogan for the conference this year was “Long-Term Decisions for a Brighter Future.”

It will be interesting to see how pressure from the more extreme elements around tax cuts will affect Chancellor Hunt’s autumn statement (to be delivered in November). A year after her government imploded over ill-advised (read, disastrous) tax cuts, Liz Truss again was leading the charge on cuts in the corporation tax rate from 25% to 19%, this time before a packed house that included hardline Brexiteers Jacob Rees-Mogg and Priti Patel, as well as Nigel Farage (the former UKIP leader most responsible for pushing David Cameron to hold the Brexit referendum; his presence at the conference, ostensibly as a GB News presenter, may have been the most noteworthy, as was his unwillingness to be pinned down as to whether he would rejoin the Tories).

Hunt, however, who gave his keynote speech in the main hall at the same time Truss was addressing her “Great Britain Growth Rally” (tag line: “Make Britain Grow Again”), is on record as prioritizing tackling high inflation over tax cuts. And complicating the tax discussion is the combination of pressure on public finances as well as a recognition of the potential need to fund social care, health and pensions going forward as demographics shift.

Positions staked out in Manchester by some could easily be mistaken as opening salvos in skirmishes to succeed Sunak, on the assumption that the Tories lose the general election, and he steps down as party leader. This portends a contest between the center-right adherents (potentially Penny Mordaunt, and perhaps, though less likely, Tom Tugendhat) and the more radical right-wing (potentially Home Secretary Suella Braverman, Business Secretary Kemi Badenoch and former Home Secretary Priti Patel).

In the meantime, voters (or at least those paying attention) were treated to what Guardian journalist Rafael Behr (“[Mad, bad and dangerous: we are witnessing the Tories' final descent into absurdity](#)”) described as a “festival of complaint” with the irony that the Tories alone, as the party in power of the last 13 years, are responsible for the state of affairs they so lament, not to mention their unwillingness to face up to the corrosive impact of Brexit. Bottom line: there was little to suggest the party governing Britain for the past 13 years has a comprehensive and coherent program to address what should matter most to voters.

The Drift to the Right

At a time when polling shows the Tories struggling to retain the loyalty of “red wall” pro-Brexit Labour voters in southern England and the Midlands who powered Boris Johnson’s Tory victory in 2019, commentators observing the rightward drift have plenty to focus on:

- Last month, the government announced a [U-turn](#) on critical net zero commitments, including the decision to ease the transition to electric vehicles (by pushing back the deadline for selling new petrol and diesel cars/vans) and ease the transition to heat pumps (by pushing back the deadline for phasing out gas boilers). The government also announced moving forward with development of Britain’s largest untapped oil field, the Rosebank oilfield in the North Sea.
- The government, building on a likely misreading of the by-election victory in Uxbridge by the Tories on the back of a voter displeasure with London’s ultra-low emission zone (referred to as ULEZ), reportedly is planning to row back on so-called “anti-car measures” intended to make roads safer and more convenient for bus passengers, pedestrians and cyclists, by among other things limiting the number of 20 mph reduced speed zones. This, in effect, would deprive local councils of the ability to determine local traffic arrangements and fine drivers.
- In her keynote [speech](#) in late September to the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C. viewed by many as again³ laying down a marker for a future leadership challenge, Braverman described “uncontrolled and illegal migration” as an “existential challenge for the political and cultural institutions of the West”⁴ and described “multiculturalism” as a failure “because it allowed people to come to our society, and live parallel lives in it.”⁵ She went on to say that Britain “will not be able to sustain an asylum system if in effect, simply being gay, or a woman, or fearful of discrimination in your country of origin, is sufficient to qualify for protection.”

Picking up on this theme, in her party conference [speech](#), she railed against the “hurricane that is coming” of migrants threatening Britain, which would become “uncontrolled and unmanageable” unless the Conservative Party stays in power and “acts decisively.” She lamented that Britain has “become enmeshed in a dense net of international rules that were designed for another era” and blamed

³ Braverman introduced her roadmap for taking on the “radical left,” and positioning herself for the likely leadership contest in 2025, at her [speech](#) at the May NatCon conference.

⁴ One concrete manifestation of this view is the government’s plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. In June, the court of appeal ruled the plan unlawful, and the government appealed the ruling to the supreme court. In an embarrassing turn of event, during a recent sting operation undertaken by the activist group Led By Donkeys, the Rwandan High Commissioner to Britain was secretly filmed characterizing the British government’s immigration policy as “absolutely wrong.”

⁵ Michael Savage, policy editor of the Guardian, noted in his article (“[Far-right figures praise Braverman's illegal immigration comments and vow to 'capitalise' on her intervention](#)”) that prominent far right figures praised the speech, including the leader of the Patriotic Alternative group and Britain First. Savage writes that the anti-racism group [HOPE not hate](#) characterized elements of the Braverman speech as echoing the far right trope, the “great replacement theory.”

Labour for passing the Human Rights Act, which she suggested should have been called the “Criminal Rights Act.” She went on to tar politicians for being “far too squeamish about being smeared as racist to properly bring order to the chaos.”

Braverman has in her sights the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR)⁶ and the UN Convention on Refugees of 1951. When asked whether Britain would consider exiting both regimes (the obligations under which are binding), she stopped short of advocating for an exit, but also declined to confirm Britain would honor its treaty commitments. Badenoch joined Braverman in calling for Britain to leave the ECHR. In her AEI speech, Braverman cited “fear of being branded a racist or illiberal” as the reason why the international community has not sought to reform the Refugee Convention, or the ECHR or the European Court of Human Rights. Braverman’s AEI speech prompted the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) to issue a [rebuttal](#) defending the Refugee Convention, noting that it “has been widely recognized as capable of providing protection [to individuals at risk of prosecution on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity].”

[Freedland](#) reminded his readers that this casual view of international law is not new for the Tories, when seen in light of Boris Johnson’s attempted prorogation of Parliament, which was found in September 2019 to be unconstitutional, or the admission in September 2020 by the then Northern Ireland Secretary Brandon Lewis to the Commons that the mooted internal markets bill (purporting to reinterpret the Northern Ireland Protocol) would “break international law in a very specific and limited way.”

The rule of law has come under attack as well via accusations by Braverman and others that “lefty lawyers” are standing in the way of policies to stop asylum seekers from entering the United Kingdom on small boats across the Channel. This escalated into a controversy over the summer as a Conservative Party headquarters dossier targeted an [immigration and asylum lawyer](#) challenging deportations to Rwanda, prompting threats against her, and a rebuke from the chair of the Bar Council and president of the Law Society.

- In his [party conference speech](#) this week, the PM waded into the transgender culture war when he asserted that it was “common sense” that “a man is a man, and a woman is a woman.”
- Alternative facts made appearances at the party conference, most notably the pledge by the Transport Secretary Mark Harper to crack down on so-called “15 minute city” schemes (an urban planning theory that envisions basic daily needs being met within a 15-minute walk or bike ride of home), which he (echoing online conspiracy theories that accuse proponents as seeking to curtail rights and

⁶ There is one particular flaw in the threat to leave the ECHR; adherence by the United Kingdom to the ECHR is integral to the Good Friday (Belfast) Agreement.

freedoms) described to mean that local councils could “decide how often you to go the shops and that they can ration who uses the roads and when.”

The Tories (much like the Republican Party in the United States) have abandoned their traditional focus on sound economic management in favor of exploiting culture war wedge issues. Freedland quotes former Justice Secretary David Gauke on the eve of the launch of his collection of essays “[The Case for the Center Right](#),” for the Tories, “problems are there to be exploited, rather than solved.” Freedland explains the drift as part of a realignment of politics across the democratic world. His inflection point for Britain is Brexit. Citing historian Tim Bale, he concludes that, after defending itself against a party further to its right – first, Nigel Farage’s UKIP, which then morphed into the Brexit Party, the Tories have become *that party*. Former minister Rory Stewart had [this take](#) on the party conference, getting him to a similar place, “I sometimes think this conference is simply designed to drive the last moderate Tories out.”

This then means that the center-right will be under significant pressure, with little clarity where the newly politically homeless Tory center-right politicians that might coalesce around Gauke would go – to Labour, to the Liberal Democrats or to a new party?

Concluding Thoughts

There are fascinating parallels between the Republican Party and the Tories, starting with the splits that are beginning to emerge in the Republican Party, as some speak take issue publicly with the MAGA extremist following the ouster of Speaker McCarthy, and the internecine warfare between the center-right and the more extreme elements of the Conservative Party jockeying for power in anticipation of an electoral defeat in the next general election.

Owen Jones, writing this week in the Guardian (“[Tory conference revealed a party that's crumbling - and with Nigel Farage laying siege to its future](#)”), drew another interesting (and worrying) parallel – the Tories seem to be emulating the shift to far-right populism embraced so forcefully by the GOP following their losses in 2008 (including the election of Barack Obama) that ultimately begot Trumpism, with a growing indulgence of far-right conspiracy theories and readiness to exploit culture war wedge issues. Since the Tories no longer can seethe about the oppression of the bureaucrats in Brussels, the far-right is now focused inward – on woke, on migrants, and on civil servants, academia, NGOs and Labour-controlled councils.

Democracy depends on a functioning opposition. The world has seen the chaos that results when a political party has abrogated any responsibility for governing. It would be a shame if Britian were to suffer the same fate.

* * *

Mark S. Bergman
[7Pillars Global Insights, LLC](#)
Washington, D.C.
October 6, 2023