

No Quiet Times in UK Politics

Article by Natalie Bennett

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Amid Brexit negotiations, Covid-19 government scandals, and the resignation of prime ministers, quiet times have eluded UK politics in recent years. Green member of the House of Lords Natalie Bennett examines the root causes of this state of disquiet and how Greens can help break the cycle of crisis.

Two years ago I reflected for the *Green European Journal* just how unstable, undemocratic, and dysfunctional the archaic UK constitution was – that Great Britain and Northern Ireland were together in a state of disrepair. But had I predicted what was to pass in the following two years – particularly summer 2022, with three prime ministers in two months and a barely contained self-inflicted financial crisis – the piece would surely have been filed under “speculative fiction”.

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With the *Economist* coining a new term – Britaly (to the displeasure of Italy) – I found myself at a summer festival last year in the southern nation with locals putting a consolatory arm around me shoulders asking “What’s happened?” Again and again I explained that a 19th-century fiction – that as Dickens put it, we had a constitution “bestowed by Providence” – has had a remarkably long and effective propaganda reign, the popularity of royalist pomp and circumstance, and the failure of the UK to effectively examine itself leaving the rest of the world blindsided by Brexit and then the Summer of Three Prime Ministers.

You couldn’t make it up

A short recap, for anyone who’s been taking a break on Mars: Boris Johnson, elected in December 2019 with the mandate to “Get Brexit done” was three years later deposed from the leadership of the Conservative Party (for now at least). Liz Truss, running on a libertarian platform of tax cuts and growth at all costs, entered Number 10 in September 2022 and held office for 49 days. She was in power for little more than half of that. Her first two weeks were swallowed by the mourning period for the death of the 96-year-old monarch Queen Elizabeth, and her replacement by her son, the 74-year-old King Charles. At the end of that month, after Truss nearly crashed the financial markets and broke the pension system, she was forced to replace her Chancellor Kwasi Kwarteng with the relatively centrist Jeremy Hunt, who promptly unwound most of her platform. By late October, Truss had been forced to resign.

Rishi Sunak, who Truss had comfortably defeated for the leadership in a ballot of the Conservative Party membership, was then crowned as replacement (after Johnson aborted a last-minute dash to resume

the prime ministership from a Caribbean sunbed). Sunak has now survived twice as long in office as Truss, although only at the cost of multiple legislative concessions to rebellious Tories and having already been forced to sack the party chairman he appointed, with his Deputy Prime Minister likely to follow. Informed estimates put the “stable”, more or less, Conservative majority in the Commons at around 20, versus the 80 with which Johnson was elected.

More recently, Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, a respected character in UK politics, abruptly resigned after nine years in office. The influence of New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Aden’s decision to step aside – not being forced out – was acknowledged. I’m torn between hoping not to see more female leaders follow the pattern, given our still severe shortage of them, and respect for the practical, sensible acknowledgement of human physical and mental capability and the refusal to cling to power at all costs until dragged from a political pinnacle. The gendered pattern here cannot but be noted.

There are no quiet times for reflection in UK politics, but taking the time to ask what next, why the UK is such a mess, and what might be done about it is essential to offer any hope of a constructive way forward, as the nation continues to lurch from crisis to crisis. As long-term critics of the system, it’s something that Greens are well equipped to do.

What’s stability?

If there’s one certainty, it is that stability is not going to suddenly break out in British politics. It is possible that Rishi Sunak will stagger on into the next election (latest legal date January 2025, current most common prediction October 2024). The former would mean Conservatives hanging on to their ministerial cars and power as long as possible, and minimal campaigning in the dark days of winter, which they might regard as an advantage. The latter would be more in keeping with historic precedent for election timing.

But that would mean Sunak resisting the continual attacks from his two predecessors, both still in parliament. Neither, it is clear, is resigned to their retirement. Johnson is, in a manner that would be shocking in any other politician, playing politics with major international issues, of life and death (in the case of military supplies for Ukraine), and future relations with Europe (in the latest row over the Northern Ireland Protocol – it being very clear that Brexit is far from “done” – albeit that it appears the Windsor Agreement might have finally found a way to stabilise the position of Northern Ireland). Truss after a short period of silence came back into the public eye making it clear that she intends to pursue the tax-cutting, “growth-at-all-costs” model she tried to enact in her days in power, while also sticking her oar into the delicate subject of China and Taiwan.

Marking the inglorious instability of UK politics, both are also former foreign ministers, so have plenty of contacts to stir the pot of international relations. (if you think that’s fast turnarounds, try 15 Housing Ministers since 2010; no wonder policy in that area is such a mess.) Johnson still faces an inquiry into “Partygate”, the drink-soaked Covid lockdown chaos over which he presided at No. 10 Downing Street, but it would be a brave bookmaker who would set the odds against him slipping through that net again.

A key crunch point will be May local elections across England, where my travels into Conservative heartlands suggest the governing party is going to lose swathes of seats. Local councils, which have been starved of funds for a decade, are essentially ignored by the British national media but the electoral loss may be sufficient to drive a new revolt among MPs. Johnson is essentially the only alternative leader in play, many MPs still believing that he is the only person who can restore the 2019 coalition between “Red Wall” former Labour seats (marked by low incomes, education and higher ages, often in

the North), and “Blue Wall” (wealthy, traditional, often Southern) seats.

One response to the summer from the Sunak government is to keep its head down, to try to stay out of the headlines and deliver a break from politics for a fed-up, angry public. But that hasn't stopped the legislative push of the far-right direction of the previous Johnson government from continuing. The attack on the right to protest has come from another Policing Bill, restoring many of the repressive provisions the House of Lords was able to cut from the last one. The EU Rule Bill, entirely in line with the Truss approach, slashes environmental, workers' rights and human rights protections. On refugees, the government is still pursuing the indefensible, horrific Rwanda deportation policy, while seeking further ways to break international law, and attacking humanitarian workers offering succour at Calais.

What's wrong?

It is easy to blame individuals for the chaos – and I do – but the systematic problems I identified in 2019 in the archaic, dysfunctional, undemocratic British constitution have only magnified. Voters who wanted to “take back control” in the 2016 referendum have seen a government, the civil service hollowed out by austerity, incapable of practically delivering its promises, from levelling up to cleaning up rivers and air pollution. Poverty and inequality – already desperate by European standards – have reached new heights, with food banks, now seen by the government as an established part of the welfare system, struggling to cope.

Nothing has changed for the better in the constitution, with the first-past-the-post voting system for Westminster still leaving most voters effectively disenfranchised. Despite strong opposition from all but the ruling party, an Elections Act taken from the US far-right playbook has introduced voter ID and left the Electoral Commission under the effective control of the government.

Personality politics

UK politics' focus on individual actors rather than policies or decisions is a long-term illness. During a speech in 2016, I appealed to national media to stop reporting the Brexit debate as a fratricidal wrestle between David Cameron and Boris Johnson for control of the Conservative Party but to no effect. Issues, impacts, what's now the hashtag #BrexitReality, got an occasional look-in.

This truly is, and is reported as, the politics of the playground, as the Green Party highlighted in its 2016 election broadcast. That decisions and policies have real-world impacts, whether children go hungry or ecosystems die, is not for the lobby journalists; they leave that to the “subject” reporters, with far less access to the front pages and the start of the news bulletins.

But this focus on individual character reached new heights with the resignation of Sturgeon. Almost universally, news outlets' initial, and subsequent reports, suggested that this might be “the end”, or at least a huge setback, for the cause of Scottish independence. That an issue might be bigger than a person, be driven by the arguments and passion of democratic desires, is not something that occurs to political reporters far more likely to resort to a football metaphor than a political philosopher or an alternative economist.

“Balance” has a lot to answer for

At an event for the brilliant Make Votes Matter organisation, started by young people with a focus on getting a democratically elected House of Commons, I argued that proportional representation would improve the quality of political debate which is currently marked a “red-blue colour blindness”. “Balance”

to the BBC, and other broadcasters, means getting someone from the Conservative side and someone from the Labour side.

New ideas, different approaches, thinking outside the two-party box might, occasionally pop up in a long discussion on the BBC's more erudite Radio Four, but it certainly will not make the key evening news bulletins. That's reserved for who "won" that day's Labour-Tory battle of the soundbites or did the best job of delivering second-rate jokes at Prime Minister's Question amid the heckles and the pantomime.

What do Greens offer?

Labour is currently riding high in most "voting intention" polls but this trend does not reflect enthusiasm for its leader, Sir Keir Starmer, or its policies, which are only marginally different from those of the Sunak Conservatives. Both parties would claim, like Liz Truss, that growth is a huge priority. Both regard "competitiveness" (read risk-taking) of the financial sector as a way to restore the economy. Both back a "Net Zero Britain" by 2050. Labour wants to be "tough on crime"; Conservatives take every chance to claim they're tougher. The poll lead is built on "we're not Conservatives" and a vague promise of competency. Sir Keir, like Ed Milliband in 2015, is aiming to ride into Number 10 by upsetting as few people as possible.

With ministers now in the Scottish government, rising fast in local councils, and increasing numbers of local cabinet members on the evening regional news, the Green parties of these islands are delivering, with increasing professionalism, the message that there are genuine alternatives to the red-blue consensus. The voting system remains a barrier, but one that concerted work, in constituencies from Bristol West to Waverney Valley to North Herefordshire, can overcome, as it has in so many local councils.

Just because the Labour and Conservative parties have been the two largest parties in the UK for a century does not mean that will continue. The Conservative Party in particular, now far closer in both policy and tone to the Nigel Farage vehicles of Brexit Party and UKIP, looks highly unstable. It is hard to find mainstream channels to offer real alternatives, and with the space to explain and expand on universal basic income or the impossibility of infinite growth on a finite planet. But the alternative is to create our own – and social media offers lots of opportunities these days.

Natalie Bennett is publishing, with subscription publisher Unbound, Change Everything: Common Sense Politics for the Age of Shocks, which sets out a Green vision for the UK and beyond. Supporters can join in, and have their name in the book, from £10.



Natalie Bennett is a Green member of the House of Lords in the UK. She was the leader of the Green Party of England and Wales from 2012 to 2016. Previously she spent 20 years working as a journalist, including on the Bangkok Post, The Times, and as editor of the Guardian Weekly.

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