

Winter is coming

by Alexander Christiani | referring to Matt Goodwin's recent commentary



I refer to Matt Goodwin's recent commentary "Winter is coming" (annexed hereto). As it is common knowledge that "extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures", I think, it would now be well fitting for the King to go on national television and address the malaise in his country in a convincing and compassionate way to give hope and perspective to all.

It would be so necessary but alas, it will not happen, since the Royal family, besides some cosmetical changes (no more "ladies in waiting"(sic!)) is and will not be willing to cut through the "Gordian Knot". In this case, King Charles III would even be more popular than before – I am certain of it...

I have come in contact often enough with people of the "upper class" and learned to admire their wit, sense of humour and, sometimes self-ridicule-as well as their impeccable manners and intelligence... But now, I hold no brief for this people – inside or outside the Tories – who are mostly responsible for Britain leaving the Union, where the slippery slope started and greatly contributes to the manifold problems of this country.

They, as Matt Goodwin rightly puts it, have never given a toss (not to say s...) for the plight of ordinary citizens, let alone for the future of the country as such. It is very unfortunate, that most is home grown and could have been avoided or at least tempered.

What stance the Austro-British Society – committed to the friendship between the two countries and societies – should take? Are we right in criticising what is happening over there, or shouldn't we rather – perhaps by some kind of public announcement – voice our understanding and empathy for the plight of the British people?

Britain is still far too important for the whole of Europe in the fields of defense, intelligence, crime prevention and others, not to be taken seriously. It has to be remembered too, that the United Kingdom has always been a champion within the EU for a common market and the liberty of world trade. The European Union and indeed all of us, would therefore be well advised to advocate continued close cooperation with this country and to wish it well.

What are your experiences in negotiations if you take the above into consideration? Please let us know! We are looking forward to receiving your comments!

Attachment

- Matt Goodwin "Winter is coming"
 - Register to receive his comments regularly: <https://mattgoodwin.substack.com>
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About the author



Former Ambassador Dr Alexander Christiani is the Vice-President of the Austro-British Society and leads the ABS Expert Group which releases high-quality Policy Papers with first-hand background information on current political developments. Dr Christiani is a member of the board of the Austrian Society for Foreign Politics and the United Nations. His professional career led him to the hotspots of political developments all over the world (e.g. to the Middle East, South Africa, New York and many others) where he contributed reasonably to Austria's excellent diplomatic reputation in the world.

The views expressed in this article are entirely his and reflect in no way the opinions of the ABS.

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Britain is entering a Winter of Discontent. If you are in the country and plan to take a train, a bus, a flight, a driving test, travel on the highway, send a letter, have a beer, go to school or university, need an ambulance to take you to hospital, need a nurse to look after you while you are in hospital or want to buy a coffin in case things do not go so well while you are in hospital then there is more than a good chance you will be caught up in a wave of strikes that are sweeping across the country.

More than one million working days are about to be lost due to strike action, the largest number since 1989. This is nowhere near the twelve million days that were lost in the original Winter of Discontent, in 1978-9, or the 126 million days lost during the general strike in 1926. But it is more than enough to cause yet another problem for Rishi Sunak and the faltering Conservative Party he is struggling to turn around

Party he is struggling to turn around.

As I pointed out in the *Sunday Times* last week, while Sunak has stabilised his party it remains deeply unpopular in the country. Even before this winter, voters blame the Tories far more than global events for Britain's deteriorating economy. One legacy of Partygate and the disastrous experiment with Trussonomics is that Sunak has inherited a party that is now seen by much of the electorate as untrustworthy, serving its own interests, in the hands of a narrow elite and out of touch. Today, not even one in ten voters think the Conservatives "care about ordinary people".

What options does Sunak have? While he and his team will be tempted to recycle the Thatcher playbook from the original Winter of Discontent, blaming the unions for the strikes and trying to appeal to national unity, this time things are more complicated. For a start, large numbers of voters actually support the strikes, which reduces Sunak's room for manoeuvre. Second, this time it is the Conservatives not Labour who are in power, and are being blamed just as much as the unions for the unfolding chaos. Every train that is missed, every flight that is cancelled, every hospital patient that is not looked after will entrench the party's negative image. And, third, as I said during an after dinner talk to clients of a major law firm this week, irrespective of what happens in the weeks ahead research on the impact of major strikes tells a consistent story: they hurt incumbent governments, lowering their support at the next election.

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In fact, this might explain why the Rishi recovery already appears to be running out of steam. As I pointed out on Twitter this week, since taking over Sunak has certainly managed to increase his party's average share of the vote from 23 to 27 per cent while Labour's average lead in the polls has dropped from thirty to twenty points. And when voters are asked who would make the "best prime minister", Sunak is much closer to Starmer, trailing him by only 5-points, than Liz Truss ever was, who trailed him by 29-points. But the Conservatives remain a long, long way behind. Just how far behind was underlined by a by-election in Chester this week which saw the party's vote

crash by sixteen points. The last time this happened at a by-election in a Labour-held seat was in the 1990s, shortly before the Blair asteroid almost rendered the Tories extinct.

At a deeper level, however, this winter also looks set to entrench a much deeper mood among the British people which will also undermine the government. The strikes, the chaos, the mounting sense of crisis are all feeding a palpable feeling among voters that nothing really works in Britain anymore, that contrary to the populist mantra of the last decade nobody is in control.

Ask a random selection of people on the street and I guarantee they will all have a story about how, in one way or another, Britain is falling apart. Call any major company and you will be on hold for eternity. Interact with any branch of the state and you will be greeted by inefficiency, from police failing to solve basic crimes to the National Health Service keeping patients waiting more than four hours in emergency departments, or more than a year for surgery. Try to get an appointment with your doctor and you will conclude it is easier to play Russian roulette with your own health, wait a week to see if your symptoms disappear or they become more sinister. Ring for an ambulance and, like one patient with terminal cancer this week, you may find yourself lying on your patio in the rain for seven hours waiting for one to turn up.

All this is fuelling a sense that Britain is, at its core, is fundamentally broken. In 1979, amidst the first Winter of Discontent, Margaret Thatcher famously ran with the billboard 'Labour Isn't Working'. In 2024, Keir Starmer may be tempted to exact revenge by running the very same poster while swapping 'Labour' with 'Britain'.



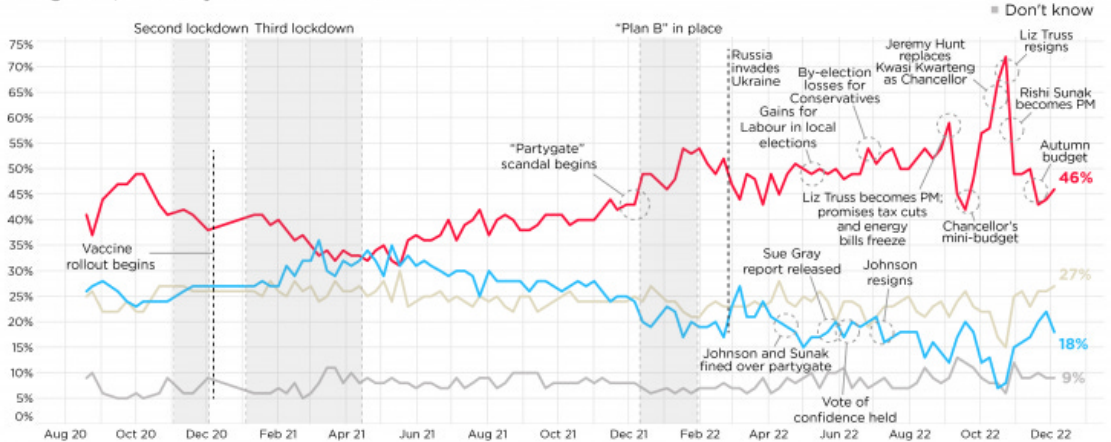


For Sunak, this mounting sense of doom and gloom matters because it is shaping two things which routinely determine the fate of governments — issues and incompetence. Research tells us that when voters conclude the governing party can no longer be trusted to manage the big issues of the day then it will lose the next election. And when voters conclude that the governing party is not just a bad manager but is deeply incompetent then it will probably lose that election heavily.

Both of these things are now happening. Ask voters how they think the government is managing their top priorities —the economy, inflation, the National Health Service, and immigration— and at least eight in ten say it is managing them “badly”. And ask them whether they think the government is competent and only one in five think it is. Put simply, incumbent governments with these kinds of numbers do not win re-election. If anything, they get obliterated and spend a long time in the wilderness.

Government Competency Rating

Altogether, how do you view the current Government?



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This is not just about people's rational assessment of policy and delivery. A

This is not just about people's rational assessment of policy and delivery. A much darker mood of 'declinism' is now taking hold of the country, a view among voters that Britain's best days now lie firmly behind it, that the past was better than the present and the future will be even worse. Ask voters whether they would rather time-travel to the past or the future and by a margin of two to one they choose the past. Ask them whether they think Britain will be a better place to live a decade from now and fewer than a third think it will be. And ask them whether they think their society is broken and more than half of them say it is. After more than a decade of Tory rule, after Brexit, the pandemic, inflation and before a long, hard winter and rapidly declining living standards, very few people in Britain appear enthusiastic about the country and its future. Instead, there is a widespread sense that the best of times, maybe the best of us, were enjoyed by people who are now on the way out.

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Declinism, it was once said, flourishes when the grand narratives that hold nations together break down. In the aftermath of the big, bold projects that were led by Thatcher and then Blair, British politics has been plunged into an interregnum, unsure of where it is going or what it wants to be, sandwiched between the broken liberal consensus which dominated the last half century and an uncertain future which, so far, nobody in power has managed to seize, articulate and lead.

Brexit, at least for many of Rishi Sunak's voters, was supposed to fill this void, redefining Britain as a truly sovereign, dynamic, levelled-up nation that was finally in control of its own borders, courts and organised around the principle of national preference, putting the interests of the national community —not globalization, supranational institutions or liberal cosmopolitan elites— first.

But now that grand project, too, in the eyes of many, is breaking down, having been usurped or corrupted by a small minority of Tory elites who only ever saw it as a gateway to building Davos-on-Thames. The rise of "Bregret", underlined again this week by the finding that only 21 per cent of the country,

including only a minority of Brexiteers, think Brexit has gone “well”, is at least partly a symptom of this deeper disillusionment, a sense that the brief and unique moment that the country had to genuinely change itself has now been and gone. The fact that the number of Brexit voters who think Brexit is going badly is now greater than the number who think it is going well reflects this declinist spirit, a realisation among many that what they hoped would be a genuinely transformative project has turned out to be no such thing.

And as that project has come off the rails, a mounting sense of dread and doom about the scale and pace at which Britain is being reshaped by all the things Brexit was supposed to hold in check is becoming far more visible, further corroding support for the Conservatives among voters who are no longer sure what has become of their party. The loss of control of Britain's borders, the rising levels of immigration which have reached record peaks under not Labour but Conservative governments and the failure of the party to push back against the excesses of radical progressivism all play into this, as do the findings of the latest census which have stoked anxiety among many conservatives about the declining share of the population that is white British and Christian, leading them to wonder who we are, who we are becoming and whether their leaders even really care about these questions.

With no grand project, no viable alternative, many on the right of politics now appear resigned to the fact that, despite trying to push Britain in a different direction by rallying behind Brexit and Boris Johnson's boosterism they are now trapped inside a car with the doors locked, being driven into a future that will be characterised by all the things they thought they had rejected —more globalization, more immigration, more social liberalism, more diversity and, no doubt after the next election delivers a solid Labour majority, more Europe. Given all this it is no surprise that as the country braces for winter an insurgent on the right of the Conservative Party is now on the cusp of passing 10 per cent in the polls, making life even harder for Sunak.

For all these reasons, while the chaos and the strikes during this Winter of Discontent will, as they did in the 1970s, weaken the incumbent government they also look set to usher in a far more significant reckoning in British politics, with a palpable mood of declinism leading many voters to either

withdraw and hunker down or begin the search for more radical alternatives. In the past, previous bouts of declinism in the 1970s and the 1990s set the stage for far more radical political projects which tapped into the zeitgeist that Britain was broken and needed shaking up, though it is hard to see from where such a project will emerge today. Either way, one thing is abundantly clear: winter is coming and it looks set to have far-reaching consequences not just for Rishi Sunak and the Conservative Party but British politics more generally.

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