

The United Kingdom is experiencing a period which is both politically stable but also very febrile.

For several years the political life of the country was torn apart by the narrow referendum victory in favour of leaving the European Union (EU) of which Britain had been a member since the 1970s.

Round after round of tense negotiation with the EU ended in failure and not just because of the hard terms demanded by Brussels. The governing Conservative Party was deeply divided, as was the Opposition and Parliament as a whole. Nor was there any consensus amongst the British public.

That trauma is now part of history but it no longer dominates, or even attracts the headlines in the UK. Britain is now as self-governing as the United States or Australia, and no longer subject to European laws or the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. Most of the public are either delighted or content.

Britain is, at present, fortunate in having no ultra right wing political spoilers waiting in the wings – unlike France's Marie Le Pen or Donald Trump in the United States.

Indeed, the UK must be leading the Western world in the multi-ethnic and gender inclusiveness of the highest levels of the country's government.

Of the four great political Offices of State the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak and the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, are the children of Asian immigrants, while Liz Truss is the new Foreign Secretary. Kwasi Kwarteng, of Ghanaian origin, is the Business Secretary in the Cabinet while Alok Sharma leads on Climate Change policy. From the Opposition Labour Party, Sadiq Khan is Mayor of London, directly elected by the people of London.

So the UK has much in its favour but the state of the nation is also febrile; there is a great deal of nervous excitement, uncertainty and lack of confidence in the future.

This has been exacerbated in recent days by the shocking murder of a popular Conservative MP, Sir David Amess, while he was meeting his constituents. He was stabbed by an assailant who is believed to be a radicalised extremist of Somali origin. For once the politicians have united in genuine grief and outrage. There has been a great deal of talk of the need to reduce the verbal violence of much of the political debate in both Parliament and the country, fomented, as elsewhere, by the anonymity of social media.

Part of the malaise in Britain is because of the continuing absence of powerful Opposition in Parliament, and in the country, to the Conservative government led by Boris Johnson. The Labour Party under its previous hard-left Leader, Jeremy Corbyn, destroyed its reputation as an acceptable party of government. They had, already, lost most of their seats in Scotland to the Scottish Nationalists. At the last UK General Election, they lost a further swathe of seats in the North of England, many of which had not returned a Conservative MP for over 50 years. More recently, at a by election Labour lost the safe seat of Hartlepool to the Tories.

The Labour Party now has a decent, highly intelligent, and moderate Leader, Sir Keir Starmer. He is a lawyer, former Director of Public Prosecutions, and well qualified for 10 Downing Street. However, he has zero charisma, is seen as boring, and has not yet won back Labour abscondees. However, I would not write him off. In the tale of the tortoise and the hare it was the tortoise who won. Slowly, and painfully, Starmer is restoring Labour credibility and consigning the hard left to the political wilderness which is where the public want them to be.

Dragoman

Labour's woes, success in leaving the EU, and Tory victories in the North of England should have made Boris Johnson unassailable. But he is still seen by most of the country as lightweight, unprincipled, untruthful, superficial and without the gravitas normally associated with the office of Prime Minister.

He will remain Prime Minister at least for the next two years – but his popularity and acceptability could quickly evaporate if either a major scandal in which he was involved was to erupt, or if the economy nosedived and entered a major recession. A Conservative Party that was ruthless about dispensing with Margaret Thatcher would not find it difficult to do the same with Boris Johnson if the need arose.

If Johnson was forced out the most likely successor, at present, would be the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak. Sunak's greatest achievement during the Covid pandemic was to launch the furlough scheme which saved hundreds of thousands of jobs when businesses were forced to close down during the first lockdown. He still has very positive ratings though, like most Chancellors, he now spends most of his time resisting extra spending and contemplating tax increases.

Liz Truss, the new Foreign Secretary, is very popular with many grassroots Tories and could be an alternative challenger if a vacancy at the top arose. She is competent and was a successful Trade Secretary. However, she is not a high-profile politician and remains unknown to most of the public. Sajid Javid, the Health Secretary and former Chancellor, would be certain to throw his hat in the ring.

Britain's political system is not doing too bad compared to its normal comparators. Germany faces the post-Merkel era with continuing uncertainty as to who will be the next Chancellor and what form any new Coalition will take.

In France, Macron is far from certain to win a second term and in the United States Biden is faltering. Trump retains his stranglehold of the Republican Party and may attempt a return to the White House.

If politics has been defined as the art of the possible Boris Johnson can be fairly relaxed for the time being. He likes to compare himself to Winston Churchill which most of his fellow citizens see as preposterous. But then the same people thought it was preposterous that he should have aspired to be Prime Minister. The future is not what it used to be!



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Sir Malcolm Rifkind is a former British Foreign Minister and Minister of Defence and was one of only four ministers to serve throughout the whole 18-year tenures of both Margaret Thatcher and John Major. From 2010-2015 he was Chairman of the UK's Intelligence and Security Committee and is a Visiting Professor at the Department of War Studies at King's College, London.