

Britain's Old Political Order Is Collapsing

By Conrad Black

The resignation of British Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer is the confirmation of the seventh consecutive failed government of the United Kingdom and the imminent installation of the seventh British prime minister in 10 years. The categorization of failure is based upon electoral rejection or revocation by the members of Parliament of the governing party. In Britain, it is not a disgrace to leave at the behest of one's own MPs if it is after a reasonable incumbency.



When Margaret Thatcher retired in 1990, as the first prime minister to lead a British political party to three consecutive full-term victories since before the First Reform Act of 1832, the disgrace was the ingratitude of her fellow Conservatives. Since then, her party has had nine leaders prior to the incumbent and all were rejected, either by the voters or their own MPs. This was a series of disgraces. The cowardice and treachery of the Conservative Party was notorious before Thatcher, and the last UK Conservative leader who left office in good personal and political health and altogether voluntarily was Stanley Baldwin in 1937. The six Conservative leaders between Baldwin and Thatcher were all more or less pushed by their colleagues, including Winston

Churchill. He was 80 years old and had had a minor stroke, but he was still Winston Churchill.

Of all of these Conservative leaders since Baldwin, the only ones that could be deemed to have been successful are Churchill, Harold Macmillan, and Thatcher as they all retired undefeated. In the same period of 89 years, the Labour Party has had 12 leaders, of whom only Clement Attlee and Tony Blair could be considered successful and only Blair retired undefeated. This is the record of the United Kingdom over nearly a century as it plunged catastrophically into the appeasement of Nazi Germany, recovered, and fought a magnificent and heroic war, engaged in total immersion in the welfare state with generally unfavorable consequences as the Empire evaporated, made a stirring comeback to prosperity and prestige in the world under Thatcher, and has frittered almost all of that away in the last 35 years.

Through all that time until the last several years, Britain has been effectively a two- or three-party system and has only had a coalition government since World War II once, when the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats formed joined forces to serve a full-term from 2010 to 2015. But the latest polls indicate that as many as nine or ten parties could be elected to the next Parliament, and five parties appear to be polling between 12 and 25 percent. These numbers represent the profound failure of the traditional governing parties to serve the country effectively and either lead it successfully, or at least follow the majority opinion with adequate diligence and perception to earn the status of a governing political formation.

The principal underlying problem in post-Thatcher British politics has been Britain's relationship with the European Union and particularly the issue of immigration. With the British, unlike the other large countries in the European Union, there was a democracy gap in Europe. Germany, France, and Italy had all within living memory been dictatorships and all had changed political systems drastically within the lifetimes of many millions of citizens of each of those

countries. The stability and continuity of British political institutions until very recently has been a universally admired characteristic of that country.

The British voted in 1972 to join a common market. The British public had never been consulted about whether it wished joint a federal union and have the institutions that Britain had gradually elaborated over more than 700 years since the Magna Carta subordinated to the well-intentioned but unfledged institutions of Brussels and Strasbourg, and ahead of its relationship with the senior members of the old Commonwealth including Canada, and its frequently special relationship with the United States, subsumed into the relations of the European Union government in Brussels with those of other countries. (As a Conservative member of the House of Lords, in 2002 I asked our party leader in that House, Lord Geoffrey Howe, if we shouldn't set up a foreign relations committee, and he told me that this was all handled through Brussels. It was nonsense.)

The European government is not really answerable to the parliament sitting in Strasbourg, and the commissioners, once nominated by the constituent national governments, have far greater authority than the comparable secretaries of state sitting in the British Parliament. The British were never comfortable with this arrangement or with the unceasing flow of authoritarian directives that descended upon them from Brussels. The flashpoint was immigration, as several European countries were either unwilling or incapable of preventing the influx of very large numbers of largely destitute people from the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and there was little preventing the overflow of large numbers of these people illegally into the United Kingdom, despite its proverbial insularity.

Successive governments not only failed to assert the security of the home islands, but once arrived, the newcomers naturally put an uncomfortable level of pressure upon the cost of

housing and other vital amenities. The British citizens of modest incomes rightly objected, not particularly to immigration in general but to the failure of the UK government to provide housing in adequate supply to avoid dangerous cost pressures on them. The government's response to this problem was compounded in its incompetence by the tendency to interpret such concerns as racist rather than objections prompted by economic necessity, and years of excessive and unjust persecution of large numbers of the British public on the false grounds of racial bigotry have ensued.

Two things are chronically worrisome in the United Kingdom now: It is a country that could lay claim to being, on balance and of all the more important countries in the world, the best-governed on average over the last 500 years—that is to say between the challenging poles of Henry VIII and Keir Starmer—and yet it cannot defend its borders even though it is an island with a substantial navy and has not seen the campfires of a hostile invader for nearly 1,000 years. And instead of eliciting from the nation an absolute commitment to the rights of all citizens, the political majority cowers in fear of the extreme Islamist minority among Britain's Muslims which is indulged in its lawlessness, particularly against the talented, unexceptionable, and less numerous Jewish minority.

There are signs of hope, particularly with the gradually reviving Conservatives, but the evaporation of the political distinction and coherence of the United Kingdom would be a grievous loss to the world. It may be imminent.

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