

Volume 33, Issue 3, February 2024

UK politics

How powerful a prime minister is Rishi Sunak?

This article should be read alongside ‘Stretch and challenge: The UK prime minister: is the top job an impossible office?’ by Matthew Lakin

On 25 October 2022, Rishi Sunak became the third Conservative prime minister in less than 2 months. Taking over what former BBC Political Editor Laura Kuenssberg summarised as a ‘state of chaos’ may have seemed a thankless challenge, but he and his supporters made a virtue of his unflashy dependability. As Sunak now enters an election year, how well can he be said to have played the hand dealt to him?

The main sources of a prime minister’s powers can be summarised as the 5Ps: prerogatives, party, Parliament, patronage, and the people.

Prerogatives

Like all previous prime ministers, Sunak was imbued with the traditional powers of the monarch – the royal prerogative – when he took office. Unlike his 14 predecessors going back to Anthony Eden, it was not Queen Elizabeth II who handed over this authority, but her successor, King Charles III. In constitutional terms, however, the effect was the same, with Sunak given a range of capabilities in appointments and foreign policy.

Sunak has so far deployed the ability to hire and fire ministers in a rather more circumspect way than his immediate forerunners. Whereas both Boris Johnson and Liz Truss aimed to fill their cabinets with factional allies, Sunak has showed some continuity with previous teams, with key ministers such as James Cleverley, Kemi Badenoch and Jeremy Hunt inherited from Truss. He has also been slower to wield the axe than some, only firing Suella Braverman as home secretary when she made her position untenable by breaching the Ministerial Code in her criticism of the policing of pro-Palestinian marches.

However, his surprise appointment of former Prime Minister David Cameron as foreign secretary – and the awarding of the peerage required to get Cameron back into parliament – runs the risk of snubbing colleagues with ministerial ambitions. And the conversations with Dominic Cummings over a potential role in the general election was unpopular both with Sunak supporters and the remaining Johnson loyalists (who Cummings has been outspoken in decrying).

Regarding foreign policy, Sunak has continued the UK’s support for Ukraine against Russia, albeit with less bravado than under Boris Johnson, and has taken a position of critical support for Israel’s war in Gaza. Arguably his most long-lasting achievement has been the Windsor Framework, a deal that averted a potential post-Brexit trade war. Public awareness of this accomplishment is low, however, and for the majority that now believe that leaving the EU was a bad idea it merely ameliorates a problem of his own party’s making.

Party

In the summer 2022 leadership election that followed Johnson's resignation, Sunak was convincingly beaten by Liz Truss (57.4% to his 42.6% of party members' votes). When Truss then resigned 45 days later there was little appetite for further weeks of internal campaigning, and the backbench 1922 Committee amended the leadership election rules to require 100 MP nominations. This effectively prevented a Johnson return and, in the process, led to a 'coronation' of Sunak without a vote of the wider party membership. Sunak therefore has a weak mandate from the very activists he will need campaigning in an election year. This is reinforced by Conservative Home's members survey of December 2023, which gave him a minus 26.5% approval rating – only Michael Tomlinson, the newly-minted Minister of State for Countering Illegal Migration, achieving a worse score.

Parliament

No parliamentary party is monolithic, but the Conservatives have been especially faction-ridden since the Brexit referendum. Sunak has, to an extent, benefited from his colleagues' exhaustion from years of in-fighting, and a recognition that their seats are at stake in 2024. Parties engaged in civil wars are rarely rewarded by the electorate, as the Conservatives in 1997 and Labour in 2019 both discovered to their cost.

Sunak has benefited from the considerable majority won by Johnson in 2019 (80 seats at the time, down to 56 at the time of writing), which is more than was enjoyed by John Major from 1992, or David Cameron or Theresa May. This has cushioned him against most potential rebellions, though he did lose his first parliamentary vote in December 2023, in a futile attempt to delay the payment of compensation to victims of blood contaminated with HIV and hepatitis. This was not a key policy for the government, and the 30 Tory rebels largely considered it a matter of conscience rather than confidence (or lack of). Most prime ministers lose votes at some point. Truss is the only recent exception, due to her short tenure and her pyrrhic victory in a vote on fracking. Nonetheless, this was a poor misjudgement from Sunak.

Patronage

Sunak has been implicated in questionable government contracts issued during the Covid pandemic while he was chancellor, including to PPE Medpro, which involved Tory peer Baroness Mone. He has also been criticised for his millionaire wife's non-domiciled status, which enabled her to avoid millions in tax. Plans to abolish inheritance tax would likely also be lucrative for his family, and Number 10 appears to have backtracked on a measure that would benefit less than 4% of the most expensive estates.

While his own New Year's Honours list was fairly uncontroversial, the same cannot be said for Liz Truss's resignation honours, which included peerages for Conservative donor Jon Moynihan and the former Vote Leave chief Matthew Elliott. Sunak has been criticised for declining the opportunity to block awards given by his short-lived predecessor. His defence is that it is an established convention followed by prime ministers of all hues.

People

At the start of 2023 Sunak set out five pledges: to halve inflation, grow the economy, get debt falling, cut NHS waiting lists and 'stop the boats'. According to the Institute for Government, while he has met the target on inflation, real household disposable income has continued to fall. The economy did grow marginally in 2023 and is forecast to continue to do so. Debt has risen from 85.1% to 88.3% of GDP. NHS waiting lists have also risen, by almost 500,000. A 36% reduction in arrivals by small boats is far short of what critics in his party and in Reform UK say is sufficient, and the Rwanda deportation policy has been ruled as unlawful by the Supreme Court.

Ultimately, Sunak's power as a prime minister will be judged in relation to his ability to win over the electorate. At present he has a mountain to climb, with the Conservatives ending 2023 on 25% in the Poll of Polls. If this is carried into a general election, it could translate into a large majority for Labour (who are currently on 43%). However, if Sunak is looking for historical precedents, then John Major's surprise victory in 1992 shows that incumbent prime ministers *can* recover from poor poll ratings, even without a domineering public persona. Whether he still has this in his power is open to question.

Andrew Stone is an experienced politics teacher

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