



The resignation of Nadine Dorries

Emma Kilheeny McSherry explains why this resignation was so controversial and looks at the wider picture of by-elections

On 26 August 2023, Nadine Dorries resigned as Conservative MP for Mid Bedfordshire. She had announced her intention to quit as an MP in June 2023 but delayed resigning by 2 months to enable the by-election for her seat to take place around the time of the Conservative Party conference in October, creating maximum damage to Rishi Sunak. Dorries has been highly critical of Sunak, accusing him of abandoning the fundamental principles of conservatism.

Dorries was urged by numerous MPs, including one-nation MPs Damian Green and Caroline Nokes, to quit immediately in June, to enable her constituents to be properly represented. She last held a surgery, in the constituency town of Flitwick, in March 2020, last spoke in the Commons in June 2022 and last voted in April 2023. In 2023, she attended the Commons to vote on only 2 days.

Why did Dorries resign?

Dorries was refused a peerage in Boris Johnson's resignation honours list. She claims she was not advised that she would need to resign as an MP before being approved by the House of Lords appointments commission, and she accused Sunak of blocking her nomination.

Other absent MPs

Since Sunak became prime minister in October 2022, the majority of 65 that he inherited has declined due to by-election defeats, suspensions and MPs not attending Parliament. In addition, around 20% of MPs routinely abstain in votes on government business. Stephen McPartland, elected MP for Stevenage in 2020, voted in just 35 out of 227 divisions since Sunak became prime minister. McPartland is one of 46 Conservative MPs who has [as of September 2023] announced that they will not stand in the next general election.

By-elections

July 2023

The Conservatives faced three by-elections in July, losing all but one (Table 1). They won in Uxbridge, the seat that Boris Johnson had resigned from, largely as a result of opposition to the extension of London's low-emission vehicle zone (ULEZ) into the constituency, a policy supported by Labour.

The Selby and Ainsty by-election was the second-largest swing ever recorded from Conservative to Labour. As a result of winning in Selby, Keir Mather has become the youngest serving MP, aged 25.

Table 1 July 2023 by-elections

Constituency	Winning party	% swing
Uxbridge and South Ruislip	Conservative	-6.7%
Selby and Ainsty	Labour	+23.7%
Somerton and Frome	Liberal Democrats	+29.0%

Mid Bedfordshire

The constituency of Mid Bedfordshire has been held by the Conservatives since 1931, and by Dorries since 2005, with a majority in 2019 of 24,664. If the Conservatives lose this by-election, it would be the worst by-election defeat in history.

Other forthcoming by-elections

There will also be a by-election in Rutherglen and Hamilton West in Scotland in October 2023, following the SNP MP Margaret Ferrier's decision not

to stand in the seat she lost in a recall petition. Nearly 12,000 voters in her constituency signed the recall petition, which was triggered due to Ferrier breaking Covid restrictions and travelling on a train while testing positive. This was the fourth recall petition since 2015 when the system was introduced, but only the third to reach the 10% threshold.

Divisions within the Conservatives

Dorries' resignation highlights divisions within the Conservative Party and the groups that Sunak needs to try to keep on side. Such groups include:

- The New Conservatives, created to reflect the priorities of voters in 'red wall' seats.
- The Common Sense Group, who oppose what they see as the government's 'woke' agenda.
- The European Research Group (ERG), a Eurosceptic organisation set up 30 years ago.
- One Nation Conservatives, who promote a centrist agenda to counter the influence of the ERG.

Class debate

- 1 Can MPs who are not contesting the next general election fulfil their representative role effectively?
- 2 How democratic is it to allow prime ministers to nominate individuals to the House of Lords?
- 3 How concerned should the Conservative Party be about the 2023 by-election results and divisions within the party?

Weblinks

Find out more about the MPs standing down at the next general election:

<https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainer/mps-standing-down-next-election>

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