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UK politics

What to expect from Kemi Badenoch

Kemi Badenoch's rise to the top of British politics has been nothing short of remarkable. She successfully defeated high-profile colleagues, most notably former foreign secretary James Cleverly, to become Conservative Party leader at just 44 years old. Her new role places her at the heart of the nation's political landscape as the leader of the Official Opposition. However, she came to power at a low point for the Tories. In the wake of its election defeat, the party faces significant challenges from both the Liberal Democrats at the centre of politics and Reform UK on the right.

Background

Olukemi Olufunto Badenoch was born in London in 1980 to Nigerian parents. Her early years were spent in Nigeria and the USA before she returned to the UK at the age of 16. She studied engineering at the University of Sussex before completing a law conversion course and working in the financial sector. This diverse background, spanning different countries and industries, has shaped her pragmatic and dynamic approach to politics. Badenoch entered Parliament in 2017, representing the Saffron Walden constituency. She gained attention for her articulate speeches and sharp intellect.

Political ideology

Badenoch is described as being a modern conservative with a strong belief in free markets, personal responsibility and cultural conservatism. She has been vocal on issues such as identity politics and free speech, positioning herself as a critic of what she calls 'woke' ideology. Badenoch's speeches often emphasise meritocracy and the value of hard work, themes that resonate with many traditional Conservative voters. However, critics argue that her focus on culture-war issues risks alienating younger and more diverse demographics. These are groups that the party struggles to engage with.

Economically, Badenoch leans towards fiscal responsibility and pro-business policies. She has advocated for reducing government spending and taxation, while fostering innovation and entrepreneurship. These stances align her with the party's core principles but could put her at odds with those who demand greater investment in public services such as the NHS during challenging economic times.

How and why did she win the leadership contest?

Badenoch's journey to becoming Conservative Party leader was driven by a combination of strategic campaigning and broad appeal within the party. She positioned herself as a unifying candidate who could bridge the divide between the party's traditionalists and modernisers. Her clear and confident

messaging during leadership debates highlighted her vision for a post-Brexit Britain, earning her respect from grassroots members who play a significant role in the leadership electoral process.

Another factor in her success was her ability to stand out in an initially crowded field. Badenoch's bold positions on contentious issues, such as her criticism of net zero timelines and her call for tougher immigration policies, garnered significant media attention.

Potential difficulties

Leading the Conservative Party in 2025 comes with immense challenges. One of Badenoch's primary difficulties will be managing a deeply divided party. Factions within the party continue to hold differing views on critical issues such as taxation, immigration, climate policy, and relations with the European Union. Balancing these competing priorities will require both diplomacy and decisiveness. With such a diminished party in Parliament following the 2024 election, party unity is extremely important.

Economic pressures are another significant issue. With inflation still high and the cost-of-living crisis affecting millions, Badenoch will need to demonstrate that her policies could deliver tangible improvements to people's lives. Critics have already questioned whether her focus on reducing government spending will clash with the public's demand for more support and improved public services. Keir Starmer has accused her of wanting 'all the benefits of the budget, all the investment, but she does not want to pay for any of it.' Badenoch is burdened with the accusation that the previous Conservative government left behind a damaging £40 billion black hole in the nation's finances.

Badenoch faces the challenge of revitalising the Conservative Party's image ahead of the next general election. After over a decade in power, the party's popularity collapsed and they won only 121 seats in the 2024 General Election. To win over undecided voters, Badenoch will need to present a compelling vision for the future while addressing criticism of her party's past performance. In addition, Reform now have more party members than the Conservatives and leader Nigel Farage claims that they are the real opposition to Labour.

Success so far

Assessing Badenoch's success at this early stage is difficult. She faces a similar challenge to what Starmer faced after Labour's defeat in the 2019 election. Her leadership campaign demonstrated her ability to communicate effectively and build a broad coalition of support. Since taking office, she has sought to project an image of competence and determination, focusing on key priorities such as economic stability and national security.

Badenoch's critics argue that she has yet to provide any detailed plans for addressing the country's most pressing issues, such as the NHS waiting-list backlog and energy prices. Additionally, her emphasis on cultural issues such as multiculturalism and gender identity has sparked debate about whether these priorities resonate with the electorate.

In Parliament, Badenoch has faced tough questioning. How she handles these encounters will be a crucial test of her leadership skills. Early polls suggest a cautious optimism among Conservative supporters, but the true measure of her success will depend on her ability to deliver results in the months and years ahead. The importance of His Majesty's Opposition should not be underestimated. Badenoch plays a key role in scrutinising the government and PMQs is still one of the best ways to hold the government to account.

Whether Badenoch can maintain the leadership of the oldest political party in Britain remains to be seen and perhaps is the greatest challenge she faces.

Leon Evans is an experienced Politics teacher.

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