

**A deeply unpopular and increasingly desperate leader, Rishi Sunak has attempted to cover his incompetence with a cruel stunt of political theatre. Publishing sinister videos from government accounts of dawn raids on asylum seekers the day the public would be voting in English local elections did not prevent the Conservative's predictable electoral annihilation as they remain out of step with the British public who would prefer help with the cost of living crisis than a witch hunt of the most vulnerable.**

2024 in British politics is being trapped in a forever election year. Constitutionally, the government must call a general election by January 2025, yet we have no idea when that will be and as the months drag on the Conservatives and Sunak have resorted to policies for campaigning rather than governing. The policies must be cruel by definition, full of extremes and intolerance, but not necessarily strategically effective for their stated objectives. In January 2023, Sunak outlined 5 pledges that the public could judge him on, a way to distinguish himself from our previous disastrous Prime Ministers (Truss and Johnson) and set benchmarks that could be referred to in the coming election year. These were to: halve inflation, grow the economy, get debt falling, cut NHS waiting lists and stop the boats.

With the UK economy continuing to falter, and the Conservative's usual ideological lack of interest in fixing our public health service, it seems Sunak's legacy and election platform is now riding on his ability to tackle what his government terms 'illegal immigration'. The problem with this is immigration is no longer as high in the public's concerns as it was 10 years ago, regularly coming behind the economy, NHS and cost of living crisis. The only people who still really care about it are a dwindling set of voters in the core Conservative base and only appealing to them, at the expense of the rest of the electorate, is not how you win elections after 14 years in power. The effect of this can be seen in voting intention with the Conservatives polling in the low 20s for the last year and Labour comfortably at around 45%.

So why does Sunak keep leading them down this path? Reform UK (previously The Brexit Party), has made the Conservatives perceive an existential threat on their right flank seemingly causing them to panic and double-down on the most inhumane and ineffective policies. Founded by Nigel Farage who has been very successful in influencing the political agenda since his initial euro-sceptic party UKIP, it has been argued that Reform UK are eating into the Conservative vote share, which is forcing them to tack ever right-ward. In the last month or so we've had a flurry of activity and government department announcements from prohibiting partners and dependents of foreign carers from coming to the UK with them in the middle of a domestic care crisis, to a pledge to crackdown on 'sick-note' culture in a society with high levels of employment and some of the lowest numbers of sick leave in Europe. When in doubt, demonise foreigners and the sick. And then there's the infamous Rwanda Scheme.

The Rwanda asylum plan was in fact introduced by Boris Johnson two years ago and proposed that those whom the United Kingdom identified as illegal immigrants or asylum seekers would be relocated to Rwanda for processing, asylum and resettlement. Those successful in claiming asylum remain in Rwanda, and are not permitted to return to the UK.

The first flight for this plan, scheduled for 14 June 2022, was halted due to a last-minute interim measure by the European Court of Human Rights. The Court of Appeal ruled in June 2023 that the plan was unlawful; with an appeal to the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom leading to a concurrence with the lower court in November 2023. Sunak, having tacked his political survival to 'stopping the boats' railroaded through the legislation with the cynically named Safety of Rwanda Act 2024, which overruled the courts' judgments and declared Rwanda a safe country. This was after a period of 'ping-pong' between lower and upper legislative chambers, as the latter tried to implement amendments to allow an independent committee to decide if Rwanda is safe and exempt Afghans who had helped British troops. In April 2024 the bill passed with the Lords ceding to the elected chamber.

Thrilled, Sunak got behind his podium with 'stop the boats' emblazoned on the front and trumpeted the deterrent benefits to his incredibly inhumane policy and announced flights would start deporting asylum seekers indefinitely from July. As the May Local elections came into view, the government, desperate for something to go into the electoral battleground with, ramped up the politics as cruel public spectacle. Last week three men were reportedly detained pending deportation to Rwanda, after attending a routine appointment, the first victims of this horrific scheme. There were reports of an asylum seeker having already been deported, although it later became clear that his asylum claim had failed and he had volunteered for the scheme after being paid £3000 by the government to get on the plane. This culminated in *that* chilling video released by the official Home Office X account of people hand-cuffed and taken to detention in the back of vans.

But was cruelty to migrants what the UK public wanted? According to last Thursday's local elections, definitely not. The Conservatives lost almost half of their councillors, coming in third to the Liberal Democrats for the first time in twenty years, and leading commentators to declare ominously that there are no safe seats for them anymore. What's more, for all the media obsession about a threat from the right, Reform UK who have constantly been given airtime by the British press achieved a meagre total of 2 councillors while the Greens, regularly overlooked, almost doubled theirs to 181.

Obstacles to the Rwanda scheme remain. The Scottish government opposes deportations, public protests have mobilised to stop the vans from taking people to detention centres, lawyers will be seeking to prevent clients leaving on a case-by-case basis, while questions remain which airlines will be used and if Rwanda even has the capacity to meet their commitments.

The flights may never leave, but according to lawyers representing asylum seekers the threat has caused a higher risk of suicide amongst their clients. Furthermore, the government has lost contact with two thirds of those previously identified for deportation putting them in further danger as they try to 'disappear'. Using the most vulnerable people, many traumatised by war, separated from family and desperate for sanctuary as part of a propaganda psychodrama is another level in the horrendous track record for an immoral failing regime.

The media's obsession and mainstreaming of what we can only call Trumpian optics has certainly contributed to this situation. By only considering threats from the right, while ignoring the now clear leftward shift in public opinion, they have artificially manufactured the most obscene show.