

Politics

Sunak's Big Bet Ends in Tory Party's Worst Defeat in History

'Everything that could go wrong, did go wrong' in the six week election campaign say former cabinet ministers.



Rishi Sunak departs Conservative Party headquarters in London, on July 5. *Photographer: Hollie Adams/Bloomberg*

By [Alex Wickham](#)

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As Rishi Sunak stood in the pouring rain outside 10 Downing Street to announce a snap election that even his own campaign chief didn't want to call he could only have guessed at what he was unleashing. The premier – his suit drenched after he declined an umbrella – had bet the house on a summer vote, a Hail Mary bid to buck opinion polls predicting his Labour rival Keir Starmer would win power. After that came the deluge, which over six weeks of campaigning washed away the Conservative government and delivered the party's worst ever electoral performance.

“I am sorry,” Sunak said just before 5 a.m. on Friday as he conceded defeat. “The British people have delivered a sobering verdict,” he admitted. “I take responsibility for the loss.”

Even before Starmer's resounding majority was confirmed, the recriminations had begun. The end of 14 years of Conservative rule – which many in the party fear will keep them out of office for a generation – laid to waste the political careers of more than half of Sunak's Cabinet, after a decade that will go down as one of the country's most turbulent since the Second World War. The future of the 300 year-old party is again in question with the Tories now buffeted from the right by Brexit architect Nigel Farage's Reform UK party, and with little space left in the center-ground occupied by Starmer.



A rain-soaked Rishi Sunak announces the general election outside 10 Downing Street in London, on May 22. *Photographer: Chris J. Ratcliffe/Bloomberg*

Senior Conservatives disagree on how the party got here, depending on their own role in the downfall. But one point of consensus is that Sunak's approach to the election was a disaster. In the final days of the campaign, three members of Sunak's Cabinet, speaking on condition of anonymity, told Bloomberg that it was the worst they had ever seen. As one put it: everything that could go wrong, did go wrong.

“The Conservative Party has taken a battering because it failed to honor the trust people placed in it,” outgoing Cabinet member Penny Mordaunt said after she lost her seat. “Voters have been dismayed by our inability to iron out our differences in private,” ousted Defence Secretary Grant Shapps added, condemning the “endless political soap opera” of Tory

politics that he said had become “indulgent and entrenched” in recent years.



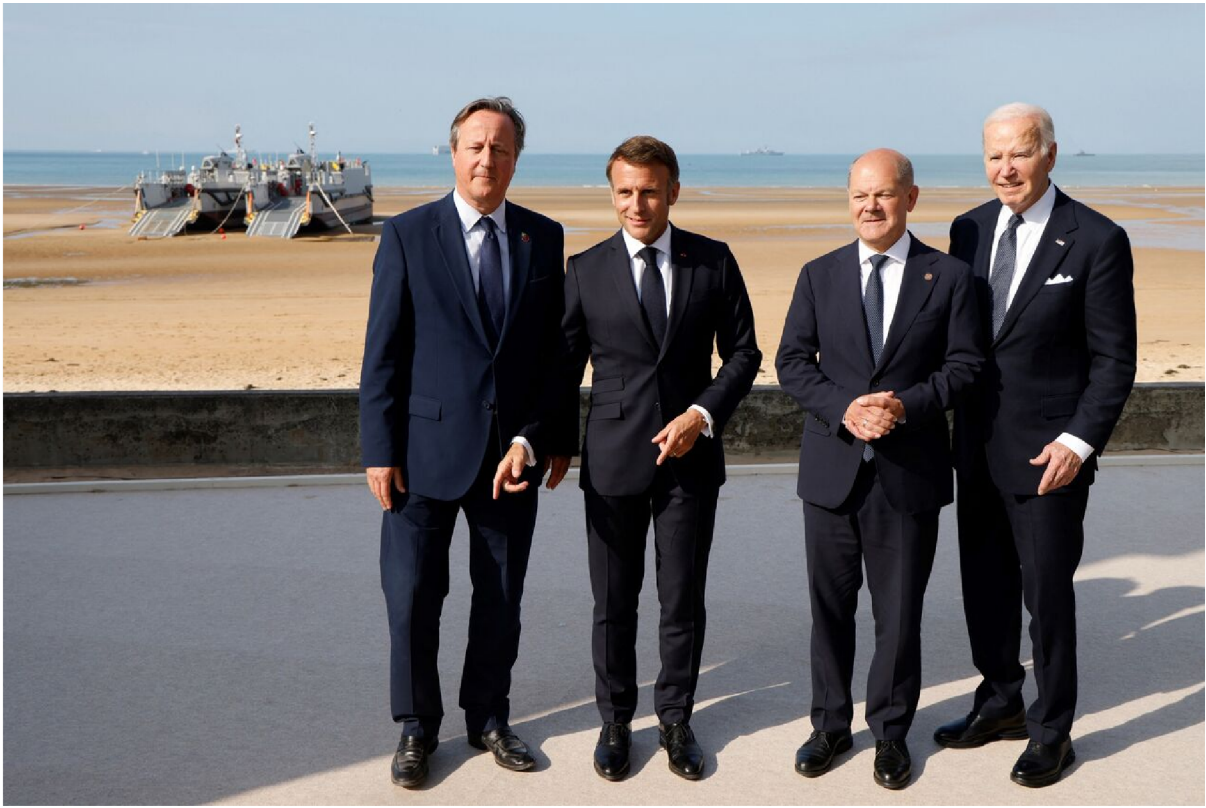
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The lowest point of Sunak’s election – and arguably his premiership – came just a week after he called the vote. He opted to leave commemorations for the 80th anniversary of the D-Day landings in France early to return home for a television interview, a move which provoked outrage among patriotic voters and damning criticism of his judgment from within his own party and beyond. Second World War veterans accused him of letting his country down, forcing him into an abject apology.

As gaffes go, it was the most hellish imaginable and meant there was no way back with voters, one aide to the prime minister said. Another admitted they wondered at that point if a visibly crestfallen Sunak might resign there and then.



David Cameron - standing in for Sunak, Emmanuel Macron, Olaf Scholz and Joe Biden during D-Day commemorations at Omaha Beach in Normandy, France, on June 6. Sunak's decision to leave the event early proved a low point in the campaign. *Photographer: LUDOVIC MARIN/AFP*

He didn't and vowed to fight on, yet just days later things got worse. Media reports emerged that people close to Sunak – including his parliamentary aide, senior members of his campaign team and a police officer who served as one of his security guards – had been accused of placing bets on the date of the election before the prime minister had announced it. The allegation, which Sunak has not denied, was that they had used inside information they'd gleaned from him to make a profit.

It was the final nail in the coffin, one of Sunak's team said. It tapped into the public outcry over other recent Conservative scandals, most memorably the so-called Partygate revelations of drunken Downing Street parties that broke Covid lockdown rules during Boris Johnson's premiership.

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Others in the party argue that tactically Sunak came up short. And that the tax-cutting line he settled on in the final days of the campaign – which even some in Labour thought was effective and could've won back votes – came too late.

Allies of Sunak insist that no matter how the campaign went, it was always unlikely he would have been able to win the election after the Tory implosion in 2022 that saw three prime ministers in office within just five months: Johnson, Liz Truss and finally Sunak. For those Conservatives more sympathetic to the outgoing prime minister, the roots of the party's landslide defeat lie in the cratering of its poll rating that took place first when Johnson's premiership imploded, and then when Truss's mini-budget left millions of mortgage borrowers facing a sharp increase in their repayments.



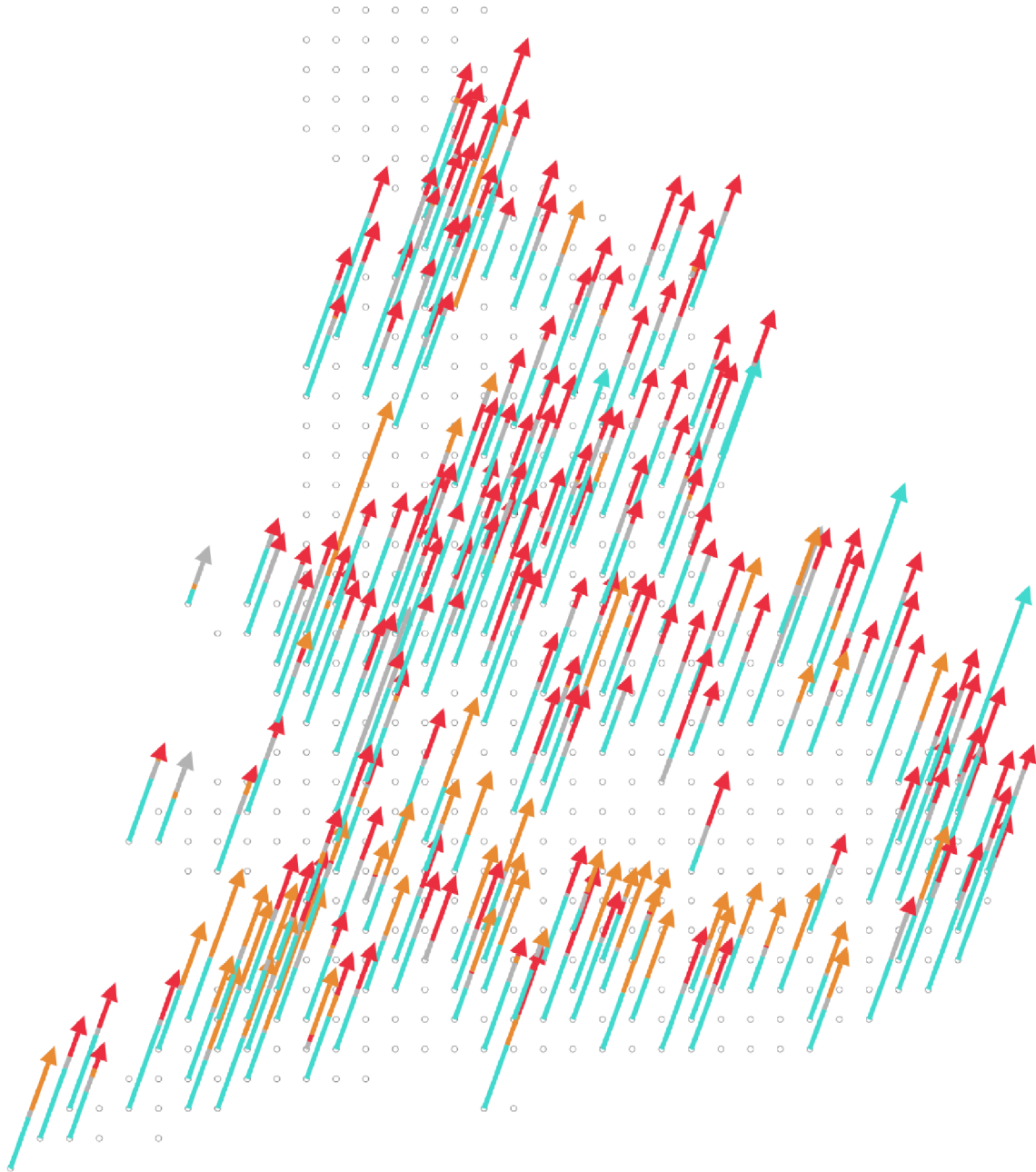
Former UK prime ministers Liz Truss and Boris Johnson. *Photographer: WPA Pool/Getty Images Europe*

Loyalists argue Sunak was dealt a bad hand, having to manage unenviable public finances and a crumbling health service after Covid, then a global inflation crisis triggered by Russian President Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine. Sunak, who was chancellor under Johnson, has privately bemoaned why the public didn't give him a fairer hearing. He told reporters during the last days of the campaign: "You've got to just play the cards that you're dealt. No point sitting there going, 'well, I wish someone had given me four aces.'"

Others look back to June 2016 and the vote to leave the European Union as the moment the Conservative Party "unleashed demons" that would inevitably tear it apart. Among them is Craig Oliver, who headed

communications for David Cameron's government – which called the Brexit vote – and the campaign to remain in the bloc.

Reform Surge Turned a Labour Election Win Into a Tory Wipeout



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Brexit “created pandemonium” by realigning British politics and turning the Tories into a party – especially after the 2019 election – that relied on votes from both traditional conservatives in the south of England and working-class former Labour voters in the north, said Oliver. “Strange bedfellows” whose support for the Conservatives “was never going to hold.”

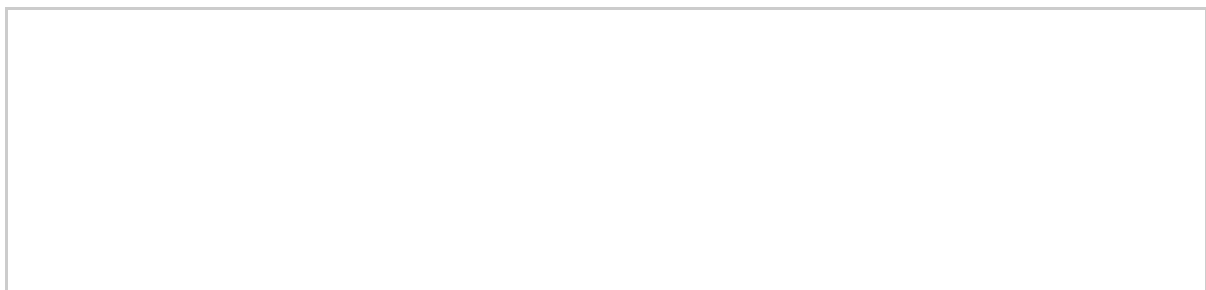
The Brexiters were “highly skilled campaigners but absolutely useless at governing,” he added.

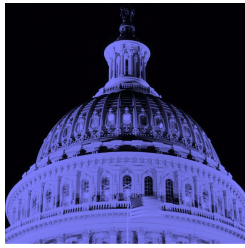
Sunak’s critics maintain that even if he was given a tough hand, he played it badly. Tory ministers and aides who spoke to Bloomberg had three chief criticisms of his election campaign.



Nigel Farage reacts after his win in the Clacton seat is announced on July 5. *Photographer: Chris Ratcliffe/Bloomberg*

First, Sunak decided to call the vote in July against the advice of his top campaign aide Isaac Levido, who wanted to hold it later in the year to allow time for the economy to improve. An extra few months may not have stopped a Labour victory but it might have reduced the margin, one campaign staffer said. It would also have avoided the situation where Conservative headquarters was unprepared for an election its own leader had called. It wasn’t ready for the battle and hadn’t selected candidates or raised enough money to pay for the campaign, lawmakers and officials said.





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Then there was Sunak's miscalculation that Farage was planning to sit out the election. Instead, Donald Trump's friend dramatically returned to front-line politics as the leader of the right-wing Reform two weeks into the election. It sent the fringe party surging in the polls – briefly pushing the Tories into an embarrassing third place with some pollsters – and killed Tory hopes of clawing back votes from traditional conservatives. That was Sunak's biggest misjudgment, another Conservative aide said.

Tory lawmakers also bemoaned Sunak's strategy throughout his premiership of trying to appeal to right-wing voters with policies such as his focus on a proposal to send asylum seekers to Rwanda, which pushed the issue of migration up the political agenda without ever implementing the plan he said would help resolve it.



Rishi Sunak feeds sheep on a farm in Barnstaple, during an election campaign on June 18. *Photographer: Leon Neal/AFP/Getty Images*

The Tory party's shift to the right under Sunak on issues like this and the dialing back of commitments on net zero targets was always unlikely to

convince those voters who never trusted him, and only served to alienate the center-ground, directly causing a haemorrhaging of votes to Labour and the Liberal Democrats, a minister said.

In the later stages of the campaign, as everything seemed to turn against Sunak, he visited a farm in the supposedly safe Tory heartlands of Devon for a photo opportunity feeding sheep. As the flock ran away from the premier in their dozens, he sighed and sank to his haunches in front of the cameras.

It turned out to be a perfect allegory for the campaign. Just days later, it was the voters who ran away from Sunak and the Conservative Party in their droves.

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