

TURNING RIGHT

THE DANGEROUS TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY

NICK LOWLES and JOE MULHALL

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INTRODUCTION

HOPE not hate has a proud history of opposing the far right for almost 20 years. We have campaigned against the British National Party, English Defence League, UKIP and countless other far right and fascist groups. We have also called out racism when it comes from mainstream politicians and parties; whether that is islamophobia in the Conservative Party or antisemitism within Labour. This has often drawn criticism, with some arguing we should stick to campaigning against the traditional far right, but for us, it is about being consistent antifascists, willing to take on hate wherever we find it.

Now, we are faced with a growing 'radical right' within the Conservative Party, which is best understood as an ultraconservative faction with an ideology that combines assertive nationalism, identity driven hostility to immigration and an anti-elite message.

As this report explains, some are doing this for short-term opportunistic reasons, believing it will improve their chances at next year's General Elections, some are doing it because they are being pushed into adopting it by an angry rank and file and some are doing it because they genuinely believe it in.

Many have dismissed Suella Braverman's inflammatory recent speeches as merely positioning herself for the party leadership, but this is short-sighted as ignores the impact it has amongst the Conservative Party membership and, through a delighted right-wing media, to the British public.

That both her speeches – one to the American Enterprise Institute in America, the other at the Conservative party conference - were agreed in advance by Rishi Sunak, demonstrates that this is either a calculated political strategy to speak to voters who are uncomfortable with immigration or simply a sign that he is too weak to stop her.

The problem is deeper than just views on multiculturalism and immigration. The conference was dominated with a "war on woke" agenda, with a succession of Ministers are targeting marginalised groups in society and those who seek to defend them. In watering down their net zero targets, the Conservatives are increasingly adopting far right conspiracy theories and literally making up false accusations against their opponents.

We have produced this pamphlet because we believe that the radical right agenda is highly divisive and dangerous to our country. We believe that left unchecked, it could take Britain into a very dark place.

At HOPE not hate, we do not want that to happen and so we believe it is important that speak out against it.

October 2023

TURNING RIGHT

LAST WEEK, the Home Secretary Suella Braverman gave one of the most inflammatory speeches by a Conservative MP since Enoch Powell's infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech in 1968. While Braverman's adoption of far-right language is nothing new – previously calling the arrival of refugees an 'invasion' – her speech to the American Enterprise Institute has shocked many in its extremeness.

While Enoch Powell said, "It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre," Braverman spoke of an "existential challenge". She also took aim at the supposed failure of the "misguided dogma of multiculturalism."

In words deliberately designed to generate fear and anger, Braverman claimed, with no factual basis, that 100 million people around the world qualify for asylum in the UK, "and let's be clear: They are coming here."

However, what really marks the speech out as a landmark moment is Braverman's attack on the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention, a touchstone of international law since its signing. This comes after increasing discussion



Suella Braverman. © House of Lords 2022 / photography by Roger Harris

by the current Government about pulling out of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Braverman also made the demonstrably false assertion that “simply being gay, or a woman, and fearful of discrimination in your country of origin,” is sufficient to claim asylum. This of course is not the case in either British law or under the Refugee Convention.

What makes all of this even more troubling is that it was later confirmed that Prime Minister Rishi Sunak had signed the speech off beforehand.

Braverman’s speech was just the latest example of this Government using far-right rhetoric, however, and comes off the back of Sunak forging alliances with explicitly far-right partners in Europe.

On the sidelines of last month’s G20 Summit in Delhi, at which the British were largely peripheral figures, Sunak went on a charm offensive in an attempt to win international backing for his controversial plan to send asylum seekers to Rwanda. In what the *Daily Mail* called a “Spritz Summit”, Sunak huddled together with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to discuss building international support for the plan.

Both leaders promised to redouble their commitment to building international support and with Italy chairing the G7 next year, Meloni promised to put addressing immigration to the top of the political agenda.

“Where Britain leads others will follow,” Sunak confidently announced.

Sunak and Meloni have formed a close political alliance over the past year. The strong bond between the two reflects both Britain’s isolated position on the world stage and signifies just how hardline Britain’s approach to immigration has become.

The willingness to collaborate with far-right parties, the increasingly regular use of far-right rhetoric, the adoption and amplification of conspiracy theories and a raft of reactionary policies means it is now

FAR RIGHT PRAISE

“Suella Braverman has basically admitted multiculturalism has failed and that mass immigration is a threat to the West. This is a good thing. Now I know that many nationalists will complain that this is just a pre-election stunt and that it is nothing more than a desperate attempt to win back voters. I don’t know whether that is entirely true. What I do know, is that what she said is a good thing for nationalism.”

Mark Collett, leader of the nazi Patriotic Alternative



HOPE NOT HATE'S RED LINES

In 2019, ahead of the General Election, HOPE not hate created its Red Lines to determine how we approach mainstream candidates. Whilst we had long campaigned against traditional far right parties in elections, we were now encountering candidates from mainstream parties who had views against the mission of HOPE not hate.

We agreed to campaign against candidates from mainstream parties who engage, or who have engaged, in behaviour that we consider crosses the line into hate.

We established a working group to create a rigorous process for deciding which candidates to take on during this election.

Our process looked at the contentious things they had said and done, the context of those incidents, whether it was a one-off comment or part of a pattern of behaviour and when it had been said or written.

We ended up campaigning against a few Conservative, Labour and independent candidates.

HOPE not hate stands against hate – be that racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia or transphobia or any other form of hate. We also stand opposed to those people who – through their views or actions – generate hate and/or division between communities.

For HOPE not hate, the radical right crosses our red lines. They are actively whipping up fear of immigrants, through emotive language and lies, opposing multiculturalism and believing that Islam – both radical and mainstream – is an existential threat to Western Civilisation. We believe that these views have no place in our politics.

As we approach the next General Election, and backed up by the advice of leading academics and scholars, we will be again re-asserting our Red Lines with the intention of judging all candidates by.

time to ask whether the Conservative Party is transforming into a radical or even far-right political party.

* * *

Over the past decade there has been a troubling rise in far-right politics around the world. Radical or far-right parties have won elections and entered parliamentary chambers with alarming regularity. There is little doubt that the longstanding liberal democratic consensus has begun to crumble, with electoral victories for politicians such as Donald Trump in the US, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India.

Across Europe, Hungary, Poland and Italy are currently led by far-right politicians while Sweden, France, Germany and Spain – amongst others – have seen growing success by the electoral far right. This amounts to a fundamental challenge to the survival of social and liberal democracy

around the world.

For some, Britain is seen as something of an exception because of the near complete absence of a far-right electoral threat. With the rapid decline of the British National Party (BNP) and then UKIP, and the failure of radical right start-ups such as Nigel Farage's Reform UK and Lawrence Fox's Reclaim Party to gain any electoral traction whatsoever, one might think that Britain is bucking the international trend.

The truth however, is that Britain faces the same fundamental challenge to liberal democracy as many other nations. The difference is that it has emerged *within* and around the Conservative Party, rather than as a distinct radical or far-right alternative. In short, Britain lacks a successful far-right party because there is currently little space for one.

NORMALISING “RADICAL RIGHT RHETORIC”

Suella Braverman is not the first Conservative politician to use incendiary language or support far-right ideas and figures. Harrow East MP Bob Blackman has retweeted the far-right extremist Tommy Robinson and hosted Hindu extremist Tapan Ghosh, who once called on the UN to sterilise Muslims, at the House of Commons. Romford MP Andrew Rosindell's Facebook account joined a 'Free Tommy' group, while Nadine Dorries has also retweeted Robinson. Jacob Rees-Mogg, who once attended a meeting of the far-right Traditional Britain Group, tweeted a YouTube video of the leader of the increasingly extreme far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party.

Others have used dog whistles, such as Tom Hunt, MP for Ipswich, who blamed crime in his constituency on “certain communities.” At the 2023 Conservative Party conference, Hunt went further, saying that it is “not xenophobic to walk into your town centre and not want to feel like you are in a foreign country.”

Before being expelled in April 2023, Andrew Bridgen compared the COVID-19 vaccine to the implementation of the Holocaust, a conspiracy theory rife within far-right circles.

Conservative deputy chair Lee Anderson said asylum seekers should “fuck off back to France” if they objected to being housed on the Bibby Stockholm barge. Only last month, HOPE not hate revealed that the Conservative's London Mayoral candidate, Susan Hall, had ‘liked’ several racist and anti-Muslim tweets, even personally congratulating the far-right commentator Katie Hopkins for calling Sadiq Khan a “nipple height mayor of Londonistan” and liking another tweet insinuating that Khan, presumably because of his Muslim faith, approved of domestic violence and female genital mutilation.

As serious as these examples are, they were done by individuals acting independently of their party. However, we are increasingly witnessing a concerted and organised attempt to use far-right rhetoric and tactics to court votes by the national party.



Photo: Richard Townshend

Bob Blackman MP
(Harrow East)

Retweeted Tommy Robinson and hosted an extreme Hindu nationalist in Parliament



Photo: David Woolfall

Tom Hunt MP
(Ipswich)

Says it is “not xenophobic to walk into your town centre and not want to feel like you are in a foreign country.”



Susan Hall
(London Mayoral candidate)

Praised Enoch Powell and sent personal message of thanks to Katie Hopkins for Islamophobic rant at Sadiq Khan



Photo: David Woolfall

Sally-Ann Hart MP
(Hastings and Rye)

Retweeted antisemitic conspiracy video about George Soros and shared a blog post by anti-Muslim activist Cheri Berens



Photo: Richard Townshend

Daniel Kawczynski MP
(Shrewsbury & Atcham)

Attended far right rally with Viktor Orbán and Giorgia Meloni.



Photo: David Woolfall

Miriam Cates MP
(Penistone & Stocksbridge)

Claimed that low birth-rates are down to “Cultural Marxism that is systematically destroying our children’s souls”

SOMETHING NEW?

When raising concerns about the current Government’s increasingly anti-immigrant statements and policies, many rightly highlight the history of reactionary and sometimes racist politics within the party.

In 1978, the then-opposition leader Margaret Thatcher told Granada TV’s World in Action about her party’s plans to drastically cut immigration numbers if elected:

People are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture and, you know, the British character has done so much for democracy, for law and done so much throughout the world that if there is any fear that it might be swamped people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in. So, if you want good race relations, you have got to allay peoples’ fears on numbers.

More recently, under David Cameron and Theresa May’s premierships, we had the so-called ‘hostile environment’, whereby employers, landlords,

NHS staff and other public servants had to check people's immigration status before offering a job, housing, healthcare or other support.

Perhaps worst of all was the Windrush scandal that followed, where hundreds of Commonwealth citizens, many of whom were from the 'Windrush generation', were wrongly detained, deported and denied legal rights, even though many had lived and worked in the UK for 40 to 50 years. The Government was forced to publicly apologise, but many of those most impacted are still waiting for justice and compensation.

But, what is taking place right now, with the policies and rhetoric of the Government and individual ministers, is on an altogether different level. The plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda to be processed has been met with widespread anger and opposition, with even the UNHCR condemning the idea, claiming it "undermines the established international refugee protection system. It risks the arbitrary denial of access to asylum and lacks realistic durable solutions for the refugees affected."

There is now a conscious strategy to adopt radical right and conspiratorial language to generate fear and anger amongst sections of British society in order to win electoral support.

The difference is not simply the severity of the language and policies on immigration, but more the adoption of a wider far-right narrative that has become commonplace on the US right in recent years.

For some within the party, anti-immigration is just one part of a wider "war on woke" that has often resulted in influential members of the Government using language on a range of issues that is indistinguishable from that used by far-right extremists. Central here is the way they have attempted to 'other' whole groups in society they see as enemies.

The most obvious example is their attacks on asylum seekers and transgender people. The Conservative Party has ramped up attacks on the transgender community in recent years, believing such language to be popular amongst their base. Some commentators have suggested this could be an important plank of their upcoming General Election campaign.

However, they have also taken aim at those speaking out for the rights of these marginalised and attacked communities. The Conservatives' attempts to push through ever tougher anti-migrant legislation has been accompanied by frequent and dangerous attacks on "lefty lawyers," and the media.

This started during Boris Johnson's administration, when a Home Office video released in August 2020 criticised "activist lawyers" for challenging asylum decisions. Johnson himself used the term "lefty human rights lawyers" and claimed at a cabinet meeting that lawyers opposing the Rwanda plan were "abetting the work of criminal gangs."

HOPE not hate is aware of at least one serious attack on an immigration law firm as a direct result of the targeting of so-called activist lawyers by Government ministers and special advisors.

Judges, and the judicial system more generally, became a target after the Supreme Court ruled against the Johnson Government's attempts to prorogue Parliament. Wound up by Tory rhetoric, the *Daily Mail* ran the photo of the Supreme Court judges under the headline "The Enemy Within". These attacks continued under Sunak's Government with an email sent to Conservative Party members criticising "an activist blob of leftwing lawyers." Things have now got to the stage where senior Conservatives, including a cabinet minister, are suggesting the party is likely to campaign to leave the European Convention on Human Rights at the next election as a way to force through their Rwanda plan.

Judges have continued to be attacked. In 2022 the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Democracy and the Constitution produced a report that accused ministers of acting in a "constitutionally unhelpful and inappropriate" manner, which may have "created the impression that the Supreme Court has been influenced by ministerial pressure."

Braverman once told newspapers that if judges ruled against her, they were "wet liberals" and "soft on criminals". It is no surprise then that the UK Judicial Attitudes Survey found that some 94% of judges are concerned about the Government's attitude towards the judiciary.

Under both Johnson and Sunak's Governments it appears that legal checks and balances and longstanding commitments to human rights legislation are seen as inconveniences to be ignored or attacked, something the current Tory party has in common with radical and far-right parties around the world.

FAR RIGHT AND CONSPIRATORIAL TROPES

The Conservative Party's rightward shift can be seen most clearly in its rhetoric around the issue of immigration and asylum seekers. In recent years, we have seen an increasing willingness to use language traditionally avoided by mainstream politicians.

Former Home Secretary Priti Patel championed a "turn around" tactic where border force would block migrant boats from arriving in the UK, while her replacement Suella Braverman has enthusiastically continued her Rwanda Policy and willingness to describe the arrival of asylum seekers as an "invasion", a description long used by the traditional far right.

It is the Government's planned policy of sending asylum seekers to Rwanda that reveals just how far the party has travelled since David Cameron's days. While making it absolutely clear that there is a world of difference between the Conservative Party and the extreme far right in terms of operating within a democratic framework, the leading historian of fascism Professor Griffin stated: "I actually regard Braverman as akin to the racist assumptions of Nazism in terms of the way she dehumanises migrants."

Some may believe this comparison goes too far, but there is little doubt that Braverman has sought to frame newly arrived asylum seekers and migrants as alien and a threat. Indeed, the Rwanda policy is arguably

more extreme than the immigration policy of the BNP in its heyday in the late 2000s.

The adoption of language and positions more traditionally articulated by the far right has not been confined to the issue of immigration. As Dr Aaron Winter of Lancaster University put it, “the Tory Party has mainstreamed far-right ideas on immigration, race, trans rights and more.”

Similarly, Dr Julia Ebner from the Institute For Strategic Dialogue stated that “Conservative politicians have adopted far-right language and flirted with audiences on the far-right end of the political spectrum by using their dog whistles (e.g. “invasion”, “Cultural marxism”, etc) and hinting at their conspiracy myths.” Her reference to “cultural marxism” comes after a 2020 letter signed by 28 MPs that referenced the far-right conspiracy theory.

We are also witnessing the adoption of other far right and conspiratorial tropes. Just last month, in watering down the Government’s net zero targets, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak deliberately and quite consciously lied about the views of the Labour Party, accusing them of wanting to tax meat and forcing households to have seven bins. Even when confronted by journalists about these ludicrous lies, the Conservative Party and its ministers continued to peddle them.

At the recent party conference it got worse, with Transport Minister Mark Harper saying the Tories would stop the “misuse of 15 minute cities “... “what is sinister is the idea of local councils deciding how often you can go to the shops “. It is indeed sinister, just as it is totally untrue and just another example of the adoption of conspiratorial views by the Conservative Government.

TORY MAYORAL CANDIDATE CANNOT FAIRLY REPRESENT LONDON

The Conservative London Mayoral candidate, Susan Hall, has been exposed by HOPE not hate for retweeting and liking numerous racist and islamophobic tweets. We have called on the Conservative Party to remove Susan Hall as its London Mayoral candidate.



A poll of 1,003 Londoners, commissioned by HOPE not hate, found:

- Three-quarters of Londoners do not believe that a London mayoral candidate who likes racist and Islamophobic comments can fairly represent all Londoners if elected.
- Six in ten say the Tory party should suspend and investigate Hall.
- 64% say they consider a mayoral candidate who likes tweets that are Islamophobic and oppose multiculturalism to be racist.

The Liberal Democrat MP for Oxford West and Abingdon, Layla Moran, took to Twitter to hit back at Harper: “In Oxford we’ve been descended upon by ultra right conspiracy theorists purporting to speak for local residents who largely stayed away. It is genuinely chilling to see Government ministers play to this crowd.”

IS THE CONSERVATIVE PARTY BECOMING A RADICAL RIGHT PARTY?

It is of course not as simple as saying that the Conservative Party can now be described as ‘radical-right’. The British electoral system means that our main political parties are broader than many of their European counterparts. Our first-past-the-post system results in much more ideological diversity within political parties, as opposed to proportional representational systems favoured in much of Europe which tend to create narrower and more ideologically coherent parties.

In addition, Sunak’s background in international banking and hedge funds means he is unlikely to agree with the more strident elements of the economic nationalism favoured by much of the international far right that is extremely critical of globalisation and finance capitalism. Additionally, Sunak’s economic plan relies on large inward migration.

However, what Sunak has done, directly and – more typically – from those around him, has been to adopt radical right rhetoric and policies for short term electoral gain.

Standing for party leader after Boris Johnson had been toppled, Sunak trod a very mainstream political and economic strategy. Indeed, up against the firebrand free-marketeer Liz Truss, Sunak initially made a virtue of his normality. It was back to business as usual, he announced, contrasting his more moderate tone against the backdrop of the chaos of the Johnson years.

Of course, this approach did not last long, as it quickly became apparent that while the country at large might have wanted a more orthodox leader, many Tory Party members were in a different place. Sunak swung right in an attempt to revive his leadership bid, talking tough on immigration, demanding ‘free speech’ absolutism and demonising the cultural left, who he argued had captured our institutions.

His change of direction was both too late and not believed, and Sunak was beaten by Truss. However, her premiership lasted just 44 days and following the chaos of her reign, Sunak emerged as leader.

While it initially appeared as though Sunak was going to return to traditional Conservative orthodoxy, it became apparent that he was going to navigate a strategy of playing both sides simultaneously. Sunak adopted a fiscally cautious approach much to the anger of the libertarian right, and largely left the “anti-woke” culture warriors in his cabinet to do as they wished. However, with a general election approaching and his popularity continuing to tank, Sunak is now following a divisive wedge issue strategy to highlight the differences between himself and Labour.



The main entrance to 55 Tufton Street, London, UK. A shared office space for a variety of lobbying organisations and think tanks. Photo R4vi from London, UK

Sunak has consciously allowed Braverman and others to shift ever further right on immigration and multiculturalism, securing the necessary populist and supportive headlines in the right wing press, whilst quietly telling more serious media outlets that he privately disagrees with some of her statements.

This was the case in the immediate aftermath of Braverman's US speech, when he told the BBC that he did not agree with her views on multiculturalism, thus earning a sympathetic headline that he had "rebuked" her. That he had read the speech before it was delivered and has refused to sack her since, clearly shows that her incendiary interventions are part of his wider strategy to appeal to voters uneasy with immigration and multiculturalism.

As Sunak's desperation deepens, he is becoming more inclined to make reactionary interventions himself. His recent announcements on scaling back Britain's green targets and his public defence of motorists are couched in right wing culture war language about environmental zealots – despite the fact that many of the policies he is now overturning were actually introduced by Conservatives in the first place.

So, while it would be going too far to say the whole Conservative party is now radical right it has certainly shifted increasing rightwards since 2016 and there is a wing within the party that is unquestionably comparable to other radical right parties around the world.

Emeritus Professor Roger Griffin of Oxford Brookes University, a leading scholar of fascism, agrees: “Catch all parties like the Conservative party are very broad spectrums of ideological positions, but it is fair to say that there is a wing of the Conservative Party which is ideologically comparable to European radical right parties such as the AfD even though it operates as an integral part of a very different socio-political tradition.”

THE RADICAL RIGHT ECOSYSTEM

While Sunak might be shifting right for opportunistic reasons, others in the party are firmly within the radical right camp.

On a parliamentary level, the main right wing grouping of Conservative MPs is now the New Conservatives Group. Launched this summer, it has registered the support of 25 MPs, drawn mainly from the so-called Red Wall seats that the Conservatives won from Labour in 2019. While the group has no formal leader, its key organisers are Danny Kruger and Miriam Cates.

While the group’s declared objective is to return the Conservative Party to its 2019 General Election manifesto, the first policy it has announced is to slash net migration by two-thirds by next year. To achieve this, the group proposes to close temporary schemes that grant work visa eligibility for care workers and senior care workers, raise the minimum income required to gain a skilled work visa, close the graduate route to students and cap the amount of social housing that councils may assign to non-UK nationals.

Another right-wing group inside the Conservative Party is the Conservative Democratic Organisation, set up by Lord Peter Cruddas in 2022 to support a beleaguered Boris Johnson, who used the political threat posed by Reform UK to attack what they saw as a “drag to the left” under Rishi Sunak. In leaked WhatsApp messages, seen by *Sky News* shortly before the party’s 2023 conference, many CDO members promote traditional conspiracy theories, regularly referring to “globalists” and a “World Economic Forum government”, the notion that there is a secretive world government which benefits elites.

More significantly though, there is a whole ecosystem – both inside and outside the Conservative Party – that exists to support, propel and even cajole the right inside the Conservative Party, made up of journalists, academics, think tanks and activists.

Most prominent of these is GB News, an increasingly influential media outlet for Conservative opinion that regularly pushes far and radical right and conspiratorial narratives. While viewpoints vary across its programmes, a number of GB News’ most high profile presenters use the platform to promote harmful conspiracy theories and socially divisive, hyper-partisan political narratives.

Neil Oliver’s weekly monologues, clips of which are frequently shared online by far-right sources like Tommy Robinson and Britain First, regularly



GB NEWS: CHANNELING NEGATIVITY AND CONSPIRACIES

A CENTRAL part of the radical right eco-system is GB News, home to hard-right views and guests. Since its launch in June 2021, GB News has captured a distinct audience, far more socially conservative and politically reactive than the general population. It has now become the darling of the Conservative Right and singled out for praise at the recent Conservative Party conference by Liz Truss and Priti Patel, amongst others.

GB News has become a hub for minor right-wing politicians as both hosts and guests.

Former UKIP and Brexit Party leader Nigel Farage and current Reform UK leader Richard Tice are regular hosts, as are Lee Anderson MP and Jacob Rees Mogg MP.

Other hosts are the conspiracy theorist Neil Oliver, former Brexit Party MEP and ex-Deputy Leader of Reclaim Martin Daubney regularly coanchors shows on the channel, as does Reclaim associate Fr Calvin Robinson and ex-Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) leader Arlene Foster. The channel regularly invites far-right guests to appear.

DARK VIEWS

Most worrying, however, is the pernicious presence of hosts like Neil Oliver, Calvin Robinson and, until recently, Mark Steyn. Oliver hosts a two-hour show on Saturday nights that is best known for his monologues, in which he lays out his dark world view in a somewhat sinister monotone delivered straight to camera. In one representative example from August 2022, Oliver described a global conspiracy in which climate science, modern medicine and rising energy bills were all part of a global conspiracy designed to starve and impoverish the population.

The channel is welcomed by the far right. “The likes of Farage, Mark Steyn and Neil Oliver are shifting the Overton window in politics,” remarked Britain First leader Paul Golding.

Stephen Lennon, aka Tommy Robinson, regular praises Neil Oliver.

Polling of 1,290 GB News viewers, by HOPE not hate, found the majority thought multiculturalism was bad for the UK and immigration and asylum key issues facing the country. It also found that that its viewers were far more likely to believe in extreme conspiracy theories than society at large. With right wing Conservative MPs increasingly looking to GB News, the hardline approach of its presenters and viewers is likely to have a dangerous influence on the direction of the party.

consist of a toxic blend of conspiracy theories around vaccines, climate change and immigration. Recently suspended presenters Laurence Fox and Calvin Robinson regularly attend anti-trans protests, alongside Turning Point UK and neo-Nazi hooligans.

The toxic nature of the channel was highlighted by the response to the shocking allegations of rape and sexual assault against Russell Brand, when presenters Beverley Turner, Laurence Fox, Calvin Robinson, Dan Wootton and Neil Oliver all expressed their support for Brand – some before even seeing or reading the allegations – and/or condemned the well-documented allegations as “trial by media.”

The channel has been found in breach of Ofcom’s due impartiality rules three times in 2023, with at least another four shows currently under investigation.

Deputy Chair of the Tory party Lee Anderson and Jacob Rees-Mogg have their own shows and a range of MPs, including cabinet ministers, appear regularly on the channel. Following Braverman’s inflammatory speech in the US, she did a sitdown interview with Anderson. At the 2023 Conservative Party conference, high profile figures including former PM Liz Truss said “we need more GB News”, while Priti Patel described it as “The most successful, most dynamic, no nonsense news station, and the defenders of free speech. That is my friends at GB News.” Worryingly, Patel echoed Donald Trump’s media tactic when she attacked “the Tory hating, Brexit bashing, free speech deniers at the BBC and so-called mainstream media.”

Similarly, there is a growing roster of columnists in *The Telegraph* and *Spectator* who seem obsessed with fighting back against “wokeness” and the “liberal elite.”

The adoption and co-option of far-right rhetoric and conspiratorial ideology is best illustrated by the National Conservatism Conference in May. Organised by the US based Edmund Burke Foundation, the event was the latest in a series of conferences around the world that have hosted high profile far-right politicians, including Viktor Orbán and Giorgia Meloni.

Much of the rhetoric emanating from the stage was indistinguishable from the sort of conspiratorial and reactionary speeches found at traditional far-right meetings. Speakers warned about “transgenderism”, “wokeism”, “cancel culture”, “neo-marxism” and “globalists” and the “end of our way of life.”

In 2020, Daniel Kawczynski, the Conservative MP for Shrewsbury and Atcham, was widely condemned by the leadership of his own party after he spoke at a National Conservatism conference in Rome alongside Orbán and Meloni. Now, three years on, leading Cabinet ministers addressed the National Conservatism conference alongside backbenches and leading right-wing commentators, such as Melanie Phillips, Douglas Murray and academic-turned right wing political activist Matt Goodwin. This time there was not only no condemnation from Number 10, but active

participation from leading Government ministers.

Home Secretary Suella Braverman told the conference that “people coming here illegally do possess values which are at odds with our country” and that “We are seeing heightened levels of criminality when related to the people who’ve come on boats related to drug dealing, exploitation, prostitution.” She also described “the unexamined drive towards multiculturalism” as a “recipe for communal disaster.”

Her positions were echoed by the immigration minister Robert Jenrick who argued that, “Those crossing tend to have completely different lifestyles and values to those in the UK.” He was later revealed to have ordered the removal of cartoons painted on the walls of a reception centre for newly arrived children believing they sent the wrong message.

Tory backbencher Miriam Cates claimed that low birth-rates are down to “Cultural Marxism that is systematically destroying our children’s souls”, a reference to the longstanding far-right conspiracy theory.

The biggest cheers of the conference came in response to the speeches of Melanie Phillips, who attacked the Conservative Party leadership and Matthew Goodwin, who spoke about the ‘new liberal elite’.

Pre-empting the likely attack on the conference, Phillips used her column in *The Times* to defend National Conservatism, which she said was an “attempt to reclaim conservatism throughout the West for authentically conservative principles, on the basis that these have largely been lost.”

WHO ARE THE ELITE?

The Royal Family

Business leaders
Religious leaders

Celebrities & sports stars

Government ministers

House of Lords

Millionaires & billionaires

All politicians

Left wing media commentators

Right wing media commentators

None of these

Newspaper owners

Don't know

Academics

Social media companies

The Tory right claim the elite are middle class social liberals.
1,550 British people polled in April by Focaldata, on behalf of HOPE not hate, think differently.
Q: When you think of 'elites' in Britain, which of the following come to mind?

“Much of what currently passes for conservatism is no more than blue-rinsed universalism and hyper-individualism, the credal values of the left, which has taken a wrecking ball to the legitimacy of the western nation and its core institutions and precepts. The fact that many who call themselves conservative would vigorously deny this merely illustrates the depth of the problem.”

“The NatCon conference represents an attempt to explore what conservatism actually is and how it has lost sight of the principles that must be conserved.”

Another group operating on the fringes of the party is the New Cultural Forum. Set up by former UKIP London Assembly member Peter Whittle, it claims to challenge “the cultural orthodoxies dominant in the media, academia, education, and wider British culture.”

In 2020, the NCF published *Fighting Back*, which claims to offer “positive and constructive suggestions on how best to defend both British and Western culture in the face of an unprecedented onslaught.” The Foreword is written by Nick Timothy, Theresa May’s former Chief of Staff and now a prospective Conservative MP for West Suffolk, and it includes contributions from controversial figures such as Eric Kaufmann and Dr David Starkey. Another contributor is Rev Calvin Robinson, until last month a GB News presenter, who has defended colonialism and the British Empire, described England’s footballers taking the knee as “disgusting” and opposes the ordination of women and abortion.

The NCF operates from 55 Tufton Street, recently described by the BBC as “the other black door shaping British politics.” Among the other organisations that operate from that address are the Tax Payers’ Alliance and the Global Warming Policy Foundation – and is the former home of many others, such as Vote Leave and Brexit Central. Restore Trust, the supposed ‘anti-woke’ group which attempted to take control of the Natural Trust operated from this building, as did Net Zero Watch and the right wing Institute of Economic Affairs.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Global Warming Policy Foundation, one of the world’s leading organisations denying climate change, publicly welcomed Rishi Sunak’s weakening of the net zero targets, stating that it was a “significant first move” towards completely dismantling the net zero targets altogether. Fare Fuel UK, which is run by Reform UK’s London Mayoral candidate Howard Cox and also operates out of Tufton Street, likewise welcomed the move, saying it offered a “breathing space” to overturn the ban on petrol and diesel car sales.

Also backing Sunak’s announcement was the Net Zero Scrutiny Group, made up of 25 backbench Conservative MPs, led by Thanet South MP Craig Mackinlay and founded by Steve Baker MP. The Net Zero Scrutiny Group also operates out of Tufton Street and whilst it claims not to deny climate change, it draws heavily on the research by the climate change denying Global Warming Policy Foundation.

DISSENTING VOICES

There are many people in the Conservative Party bitterly opposed to the party's lurch to the right and the growing influence of the radical right. It is just that few will currently vocalise their unhappiness.

One leading Conservative Party member has told HOPE not hate that he predicts that only about 100 of the party's 354 MPs could be considered to be social conservatives or radical right. However, they, and the wider radical right eco-system, have a significant influence on the party as a whole.

Fear of attack or even political retribution is forcing many moderate Conservatives into silence.

A few, however, are speaking up.



Sir Robert Neill MP
Photo: Richard
Townshend

Bob Neill, a Conservative MP and chair of the justice select committee, told the Times that Braverman's rhetoric was "excessive and unhelpful".

Tobias Ellwood MP, shared similar concerns. "We've earned our permanent seat on the United Nations security council because we've helped shape international law. We actually support it, we advance it. What we don't do is then run roughshod through it," Ellwood told ITV's Peston programme.

He went on: "I distance myself from some of those comments."

Peers Gavin Barwell, Theresa May's former chief of staff, and Danny Finkelstein have both publicly criticised London Mayoral candidate Susan Hall for her claim that Jews in London were living in fear of Sadiq Khan.

These sentiments were echoed by Government Minister Nusrat Ghani, who told a British Future fringe that said Conservatives should not "stoop" to using the "language of fear and demeaning our political opponents".

Tory peer Sayeeda Warsi, has repeatedly criticised Braverman of engaging in "racist rhetoric" and urged the Prime Minister to take action.

"I do not believe Sunak shares Braverman's extreme views.

"But as head of the party, the responsibility stops with him. As the first prime minister from an ethnic minority background, he should not want to be remembered for presiding over a government that engaged in racist rhetoric."



Sayeeda Warsi
Photo: Chris McAndrew

Nigel Farage's return to the Conservative Party was mooted at the party conference
Photo: Gage Skidmore



PUSH AND PULL

Just as Margaret Thatcher's 1978 'Swamped' speech was designed to undermine the threat posed by the National Front, so the party's more recent rightward trajectory was kickstarted by a threat from their right, this time in the form of UKIP. Professor Tim Bale of Queen Mary University of London argues that "Owing to their desperate, decade-long desire to defeat (or at least contain) the insurgency on its flank led by Nigel Farage, the Conservatives are in severe danger of transforming themselves from a mainstream centre-right outfit into an ersatz radical right wing populist party." In other words, the Conservative Party sought to defeat the threat of UKIP by shifting right and occupying their place on the political spectrum.

Professor Daphne Halikiopoulou from the University of York agrees, stating, "The Conservative Party has indeed shifted to the right in recent years. The Brexit referendum and the polarised debate around it had a strong impact on the party's radicalism and populism, which increased significantly since 2016." She added, "I'm not sure it can yet be classified as populist and/or far right overall, but it is moving in this direction."

Whether the Conservative Party should be described as 'populist' is a very live debate. Professor Cas Mudde defines 'populism' as an "ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite", and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people."

Dr Mondon from the University of Bath argues that "While [the Conservatives] do seek to construct a people, their construction of an elite is secondary in my opinion and more akin to typical (far)-right-wing politics than populist."

That said, there is no doubt that the party is comfortable using populist

tropes and has paradoxically tried to present themselves as “anti-elite” and framed some of their policies, especially those related to asylum seekers, as the common will of the people.

To do this they have employed the oft-used populist tactic of redefining the ‘elite’. While he is not formally part of the Conservative Party, this reframing exercise has been advanced by Professor Matt Goodwin and his recent book *Values, Voice and Virtue* which offers a definition of a ‘new elite’ that doesn’t focus on the party that has been in power for over a decade, nor billionaires, business owners or aristocrats, but instead describes the ‘elite’ as a group “defined by their very liberal if not radical “woke” values which they are now imposing on the rest of the country through their tight control over the institutions.”

Addressing the Institute for Government think tank, in September 2023, former Prime Minister Liz Truss blamed the media, the opposition Labour Party, and economic orthodoxy for her downfall. “The anti-growth coalition is now a powerful force, comprising the economic and political elite, corporatist part of the media, and even a section of the Conservative parliamentary party,” she argued, as she said her libertarian economic ideas were “simply ... not fashionable on the London dinner party circuit.” She urged the Tories not to be “scared” of climate activists, “anti-capitalists and the ... woke diversity brigade.”

This type of mental gymnastics has allowed the Conservative Party – a party that has been in power for thirteen years and is led by a multi-millionaire – to try to portray themselves as the voice of the people fighting against an imagined elite.

WHERE NEXT?

Sadly, despite there being many within the party uncomfortable with its direction of travel, there seems little chance that the Conservative Party’s rightward shift is at an end. In the short term, we are likely to see Sunak’s Government continue to throw out ever more extreme conspiratorial and sometimes incendiary policies as we approach the next election. Lagging behind in the polls, the Conservative election strategy is to appeal to its 2019 Red Wall voters, many of whom have deserted the Tories over the past two years but have not gone over to Labour.

The expected success for far right and radical right parties in next summer’s European Elections will only encourage those, inside and outside the party, to move ever further to the right. This is likely to be repeated as we approach the highly charged US Presidential elections next November, especially, as looks likely, if Trump is the Republican nominee. With so much of the UK radical right gaining political and ideological inspiration from the US, a heavily confrontational electoral battle, with immigration and anti-woke narratives at its core, will naturally find its way over here, especially in the radical right ecosystem inside and outside the Conservative Party.

The long term direction is less clear and will probably be dependent on the outcome of the election. A narrow Labour victory, and especially a hung parliament, might encourage moderate and centrist Tory MPs to curb the excesses of the radical right as they strive to present themselves as a government in waiting. However, given the mood of the recent Conservative Party conference and the strength of the wider radical right ecosystem, this outcome is unlikely.

A heavy defeat, however, will almost certainly lead to a bitter ideological war inside the party, with the social Conservatives (where most of the radical right are) fighting it out with the free market libertarians (Liz Truss wing) and traditional moderate Conservatives. The latter group would quickly find itself in a minority and, as several have told HOPE not hate, they are likely to drift away from the party in the short-term at least.

Whatever the outcome of this battle, there is now a wing of the Conservative Party that can be described as radical right, and while this group might ebb and flow in strength and influence, it will not go away.

Just as worryingly, even if Sunak and his ministers embrace radical right language and policies for short-term political gain, their adoption of them only gives further credibility to these ideas, mainstreaming and entrenching them at the centre of Tory Party politics for the foreseeable future.

Leading figures on the radical right are itching for the post-election showdown in the Conservative Party. Speaking at its party conference, where he publicly backed Truss' economic policy, Nigel Farage told the BBC "the battle is what's going to happen after the election."

We are likely to see a repeat of events in the summer of 2019 when tens of thousands of hardline Brexit supporters, many of them having previously been part of UKIP and the Brexit Party, joined the Conservatives to vote for Boris Johnson and his promise to deliver Brexit. This time, with an even larger radical right eco-system, the influx could be even larger. And, amazingly, this could include Nigel Farage, who indicated at the recent Conservative Party conference, that he might be open to the idea – though not under its current leader.

Given the celebrity status afforded to him at the conference, it is clear that he would play a major – if not leading – role in any future post-election radical right Conservative Party. He is also probably the only politician who could find a way to unite the social conservatives and the free market libertarians.

If we think things are bad now, they are likely to get far worse.

In the words of Professor Bale, "the Tories have long flirted with radical right wing populism; but they now appear to have swallowed it whole. Whether there's any way back from that, or whether they're now stuck with it, remains to be seen."

WHAT ACADEMICS THINK

HOPE not hate asked a series of leading academics of Conservative, populist and far-right politics for their views on the current state of the Conservative Party.

We asked the following question: Do you believe the current British Conservative Party can accurately be described as populist, and/or either radical right or far right?

The views expressed below are their own, and shouldn't be read as endorsements of HOPE not hate's position as outlined in the rest of the report.

PROFESSOR TIM BALE, QUEEN MARY, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Owing to their desperate, decade-long desire to defeat (or at least contain) the insurgency on its flank led by Nigel Farage, the Conservatives are in severe danger of transforming themselves from a mainstream centre-right outfit into an ersatz radical right wing populist party. Particularly since the 2016 Referendum, and at the urging of its allies in the press, the Tory Party has taken to routinely posing as the tribune of 'the people' against 'the elites' and a shadowy 'blob' that apparently doesn't understand them, looks down upon them, and seeks to stop the government giving them the supposedly commonsense policies the country is said to be crying out for. This is particularly (but not exclusively) the case when it comes to immigration. True, the Tories have long flirted with radical right wing populism; but they now appear to have swallowed it whole. Whether there's any way back from that, or whether they're now stuck with it, remains to be seen.



PROFESSOR DAPHNE HALIKIOPOULOU, UNIVERSITY OF YORK

The Conservative Party has indeed shifted to the right in recent years. The Brexit referendum and the polarised debate around it had a strong impact on the party's radicalism and populism, which increased significantly since 2016. The party uses populist tropes, adopts a strong nationalist rhetoric, and also seeks to implement/ has implemented certain exclusionary anti-immigrant policies. Having said this, however, I would be reluctant to classify it as a populist and/or far right party per se (although it may be getting there). Its overarching



ideology is neither populist nor far right (with the far right defined as nativist and authoritarian, offering nationalist solutions to all socio-economic problems), although there are populist /far right voices and populist/ far right tropes are expressed. So in sum: definitely a shift to the right. I'm not sure it can yet be classified as populist and/or far right overall, but it is moving in this direction.

DR AARON WINTER, LANCASTER UNIVERSITY

As I have argued in my work, including that with Aurelien Mondon, the Tory Party has mainstreamed far-right ideas on immigration, race, trans rights and more, and look increasingly far-right. This has occurred to off-set a perceived or constructed competition or other threat from the far-right, and as a dog-whistle and distraction, as well as because both the political spectrum/centre has moved further right and to fulfil their commitments/interests that correspond to the far-right but are also longer-standing. I say 'far right' partly because of my own preferred term and analysis – recognising the contingency and contested terrain of such terminology – as well as because of the choices given and the fact that I reject the terms 'radical right' and 'populist' (separately and together). This is because 'radical' is a normative term with a lot of ideological baggage and is used by political scientists for the right (including in combination with 'populist'), but most associated with the left in sociology and by the left. It also does not conceptually fit with the mainstream, establishment politics or power of the Tories. I also reject 'populist' which is not right-wing specifically and, when it is used as such, it can euphemise and democratise racist and far right politics. In addition to which, it sits awkwardly with an establishment, as opposed to 'outsider' and anti-elitist, party of privilege despite their claims to represent the working class 'left behind' (to relate it to the rhetoric and narrative).



DR AURELIEN MONDON, UNIVERSITY OF BATH

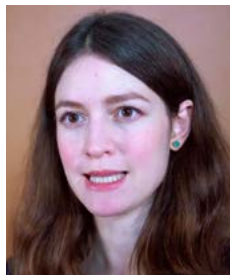
I would not define the Conservative party as populist. While they do seek to construct a people, their construction of an elite is secondary in my opinion and more akin to typical (far)-right-wing politics than populist. When they could be defined as far right is trickier. I would personally avoid saying so as I don't think it is actually particularly useful to tag such actors or parties as far right/racist/fascist etc as it then sends us down a rabbit hole where it is their word against ours. What I would say is that the Conservative party has embraced far right politics and strategies for many years. I would also stress that this



is not surprising as the borders between the far right and the mainstream (right) have always been fuzzy and there have always been exchanges between the two. I would also stress that the increase in such borrowings and moves has led to the further legitimisation of far right politics more generally as actors thought of as mainstream have espoused increasingly extreme ideas making them therefore less extreme in terms of public discourse (but no less extreme in terms of their nature and the harm caused to those at the sharp end and to democracy more broadly).

**DR JULIA EBNER, SENIOR RESEARCH FELLOW,
INSTITUTE FOR STRATEGIC DIALOGUE**

I would say that the current British Conservative Party can be described as right-wing populist and at least partly radical right. I wouldn't say the entire party is far right (yet), however there has been a clear journey towards right-wing radicalism. Increasingly, Conservative politicians have adopted far-right language and flirted with audiences on the far-right end of the political spectrum by using their dog whistles (e.g. "invasion", "Cultural marxism", etc) and hinting at their conspiracy myths.



The participation of several leading party members at this year's National Conservatism conference, essentially a gathering for far-right leaders, is another sign that the Conservative Party in the UK is occupying a space that in other countries would be filled by far-right populist parties. The danger of this is that the Conservative Party has managed to maintain its more moderate conservative voting base whilst at the same time catering to much more radical audiences, this means that some of the far-right's ideas and rhetorical devices could be normalised and legitimised, allowing them to leak further into the mainstream. I see a strong parallel to the U.S. Republican party, where similar trends could be observed over the past few years.

**EMERITUS PROFESSOR ROGER GRIFFIN,
OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY**

I think it's really important in the case of Britain not to confuse the right wing of the Conservative Party with the more overt and extreme forms of xenophobic, hate-based right-wing politics, whether radical right populism or fascism/neo-Nazism. Though there is a lot of xenophobia and racism in the Tory Party, its exponents are quite careful in the way they express it. It is xenophobic but it's dressed up in terms of putting an end to mass migration and making the indigenous British population more cohesive and economically stronger. But there is a split between the anti-EU,



Brexit, anti-migration wing on the right of the party and the traditional liberal, One Nation, pro-European Conservatism. Catch all parties like the Conservative party are very broad spectrums of ideological positions, but it is fair to say that there is a wing of the Conservative Party which is ideologically comparable to European radical right parties such as the AfD even though it operates as an integral part of a very different socio-political tradition, just as the Trumpian Republicans are related to but are distinguishable from the alt-right, Q-Anon, conspiracy theory paranoids of the US radical right which embraces populist and neo-Nazi positions.

There was a time, in the days of Brexit when there was a conflation or overlap between the right of the Conservative Party and a genuine populist right led/mobilised by Farage. However, the Nazi right is in no way to be conflated with the Conservative Right even though I'm sure there are some crypto-Nazis who join the Conservative Party as a form of entryism. When we talk about the right of the Conservative party, we have to realise that someone who is a Tory politician like Rees-Mogg wouldn't be seen dead in the EDL or Pegida, though actually, if you analyse it, some of their ideas about nation, sovereignty, race and immigration are probably quite similar.

There is a huge difference between the racist undertow of the rhetoric of a Home Secretary or Prime Minister wanting to stop the boats and in the rantings of a racist on a neo-Nazi or conspiracy theory website. So even if the fundamental mindset is very similar the expression and context is extremely important so I would never equate them. There is nothing exterminatory about Braverman's politics in terms of concentration camps and gas chambers. She abides by the rules of democracy and that's a huge difference between her and a far-right extremist.

In short, there is a grave danger that anti-demonizers, anti-simplifiers, and anti-haters end up demonising, simplifying and hating in their turn and duplicating the Manichaeian mindset that breeds fundamentalism and extremism. To retain our sense of complexity and compassion, even for those we disagree with, is vital if we are to retain our own humanity in standing up for other people.



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