

Editorial:

Sugar-rush politics

As we write, the contest between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak for the leadership of the Conservatives is drawing to a close. It's been desperate to follow, an endless dark pantomime of mendacity and bad faith. We're reminded, of course, that this is a contest to win the hearts and minds - or the hearts, at least - of the Conservative membership, the ageing cadres of largely prosperous white men and women in the shires and countryside, a Tory rump estimated at some 160,000. How could we ever forget?

The figure of Margaret Thatcher is resurrected at every possible opportunity, recruited by each of the contestants as the sign that they have been anointed as true believers. Her name is uttered as if the mantra will summon long-lost benevolent spirits and staunch the accelerating catastrophe of Britain's social well-being. Each insists that the pain inflicted on the inhabitants of these nations, harsher day by day, is nothing to do *with them*. Not only do they have clean hands. They are the future, bringing goodwill, prosperity and the realisation of human destinies for all.

Truss articulates her commitments to a new radicalism with the greater conviction - battling away against the windmills of an unspecified, ever-shifting 'orthodoxy' wherever it is to be found, in a random audit of bugbears, many of which are here today and gone tomorrow. Her calculation is tightly manufactured, placing her in poll position. The *Sunday Telegraph*, the irrepressible cheer-leader for the new dispensation, anoints Truss as 'the first truly philosophy-driven leader since Margaret Thatcher', an occasion of mind-bending cynicism. Yet this generation of hard-core Tory pugilists have to be conscious, in some corner of their minds, of what they're doing. When late at night they catch sight of themselves in the mirror, the involuntary shudder must mean *something* to them. Doesn't it?

The long-forgotten Lord Maude has now mysteriously become a Tory grandee. In a previous incarnation he was a spirited young foot-soldier in the ranks of the first generation of Thatcherites. He is currently in the news concerning his desire to play footsie with Saudi ideologues, just as he happens to take charge of the evisceration

Editorial

of the civil service. Yet it appears that even he is appalled by what he witnesses, fearful that he is watching the Tories reduced to 'a race over who can sound more right-wing'.

At the time when Maude was ascendant, Tom Nairn believed that Enoch Powell was a sign that the English establishment had begun to destroy itself. Conservatism was jettisoning its long affiliation to the protocols of Edmund Burke and, crossing the river of fire, realigning itself to the political sensibilities of its historic adversaries, the Jacobins. This was a mind-bending rupture in UK politics. It launched a long and rocky road which, with Truss and Sunak in the past weeks, has taken another comprehensive turn. In this light Boris Johnson, in his determination to outflank Nigel Farage's UKIP, was no aberration. A deeper history was being acted out - a long and troubling history in which the destruction of Conservatism is presented as the necessary prelude to the party's salvation. In the process, politics *in itself* is remade. For all the bluster, this does indeed signify that the structures of political life assume a new disposition.

Thatcherism Mark I comprised 'a philosophy', in the maximal Gramscian sense. It could boast its 'intellectuals', organic to the movement, who laboured to make it happen. Yet, although it didn't seem so at the time, Thatcher herself, for all her instincts and rhetoric, was, day by day, a species of pragmatist, tactically abiding by the principles informed by the customs of Westminster. The Powellites and their various descendants, however - whether Brexiteers or Thatcherites Mark II - see no call for such equivocation. Equivocation represents treachery to the cause. They believe, and perhaps they are not wrong, that history is on their side. The rules have, unannounced, changed - a process in which the seeming buffoonery of Farage signalled a material break.

Thatcherism Mark I, intoxicated by the virtues of unregulated markets, discovered that the deregulation of the labour markets could only be realised by strengthening the state. There could be no free market without the strong state to break the old relations, and instal and manage the new. Out of this strange brew was generated the authoritarian populism of the time, which David Featherstone updates in his article in this issue. For Thatcherism Mark I, a strong state depended on two elements. First, politically, the police assumed a new strategic leverage in the operations of the state, particularly in relation to the policing of the urban black populations, and in the field of industrial

Soundings

relations, where they were the instigators of a renewed offensive against the trade unions, the miners emphatically. Second, ideologically, the police, as an 'ethical' agent, came to frame the softer, non-repressive institutions of the state, as Stuart Hall, John Clarke and their co-authors demonstrated in *Policing the Crisis*. Authoritarian state control hardened.

Thatcherism Mark II is a more improvised phenomenon. And it is unsure how on earth the United Kingdom post-Brexit can ever disassemble at introducing anything approximating to a working economy, beyond the primal dedication to slash both taxes and public expenditure: either instantly (Truss) or down the road (Sunak). Johnson's vaunted 'high-wage economy', launched twelve months ago, lasted but a single afternoon. Once the conference delegates had packed their bags and headed home, no more was said and the rentier economy proceeded apace. But the encomiums to the Thatcher days tend to forget how prolonged and difficult the way was from Howe's crazed deflationary budget of 1981 to Lawson's interventions at the end of the decade. Forgotten, too, is the windfall of North Sea Oil, which supplied vast and regular injections of cash that cushioned an otherwise battered economy - none of which was invested in the long-term future, as in Norway, and none of which now remains.

In retrospect it is revealing to realise the indecisiveness of many of the Thatcher governments' engagements with the 'cultural' institutions - either of the state or of civil society - notwithstanding the comprehensive properties of her political rhetoric. It certainly didn't feel like this at the time. Thatcher herself was eager to begin a radical dismantlement of the BBC. It was a stern veto from her political colleague, William Whitelaw, a man of very different sensibilities but bendable over many matters, that ruled it out of order. Whatever the Tories believed, the assaults on the public sector, for example, were principally driven in the hope of cutting state expenditure. The Greater London Council (the GLC) proved an exception: it was a target on the grounds that it represented a powerful political alternative.

The Truss version of Thatcherism Mark II is different in this respect. The small state is the overarching prized objective, which requires the extirpation of all vestiges of the European Union. In terms of practicalities, though, very little seems thought through, beyond the desire for one bonfire after the other, in which the old order will be, it seems, thoroughly incinerated. Confusion rules.

One problem for the revived Thatcherites is that in the UK after Brexit the

Editorial

globalised economy offers little opportunity for the buccaneering fantasies which prevailed during the referendum on European Union membership. The stunning spike in the price of oil and gas confirms the vulnerability of the UK 'alone'. In this situation, the cultural front is more amenable to Conservative intervention. Soundbites come easily; emotions are easily charged; and practicalities aren't exactly the issue. The culture wars provide an inviting prospect, not least because on every occasion, it seems, Labour is wrong-footed. Rwanda. The dissing of the National Trust. Imperial measures. Licence plates for bicycles. Critical race theory and cultural Marxism. Or Truss's awkward insistence, repeated incessantly, that she loves her country. These strangled calls for help keep on rolling. It doesn't really seem to matter much where the intervention goes. If there's no traction, new proposals can be jettisoned as easily as they arrive. There are plenty more around the corner.

Put like this, there's reason to view the cultural offensives which are forming as both chaotic and arbitrary. From this it may be tempting to suppose that whatever batshit plan hits the headlines is really not of great concern.

But, as the articles which follow demonstrate, high stakes are involved. If Thatcherism Mark I sought the free market and the strong state, its second incarnation - Truss's Thatcherism Mark II - adds a new dimension. Free market; strong state; and a much more violently regulated civil society.

Maybe this is inchoate and yet to be thought through. But, as Debs Grayson argues, the authoritarian assault on civil society moves apace. And as the discussion of the new digital politics of the right demonstrates, ideas and conspiracy theories generated by the far right in the virtual worlds of digital platforms now regularly enter the public life of the nation, and - when adopted by the cultural guardians of the established media institutions - they can astonishingly rapidly become new material forces. Thatcher's longed for assault on the BBC is now, as our symposium demonstrates, taking strategic shape, demanding that we think creatively about how the BBC can be democratised.

We face the politics of the 'sugar-rush' (Sunak as much as Truss), which is now coming to organise the cultural dimensions of our political world. Janet Newman and John Clarke are right to insist that the putatively 'merely' cultural is moving to the centre of things, recasting what the political comprises.

The symposium on 'Digital Culture Wars' in this issue closes with these words:

Soundings

Alan: 'There's a war on.'

Rob: 'It's real.'

Annie: 'Yeah. It's really happening.'

Indeed. The structure of politics is assuming new modalities before our very eyes. The articles which follow signal the importance of recognising the political import of the culture wars in fashioning where we are heading.

Bill Schwarz

Editorial note: the first five articles in this volume represent the beginnings of a *Soundings* dialogue on the politics of culture wars. The last two articles - 'From austerity to Brexit: the failed populist moment in the UK', by Marina Prentoulis, and Jo Littler's interview with Sylvia Walby, 'Feminism is a project not an identity' - are stand-alone articles. For more details on all articles see 'In this issue' on p9.