**Ethnic experiment**

BY M A H I R A L I 2022-10-26

THE elevation of Rishi Sunak to 10 Downing Street may fall substantially short of the momentousness of Barack Obama`s 2008 triumph after all, it isn`t based on any mandate but it will nonetheless be recorded as a landmark in British politics.

Serendipitously, it coincides with Diwali.

The first person of colour in the post who, not coincidentally, is also the first prime minister to be richer than the monarch shouldn`t have much trouble exuding the minimal aura of competence required to outdo his predecessor, who established a record for brevity of tenure. The intriguing question about Liz Truss is not why she was obliged to announce her departure from office 44 days after her arrival, but how anyone could conceivably have considered her an appropriate candidate.

This is just the latest episode in the postBrexit psychodrama that Conservative politics descended into. The preceding decades had their own problems. In the past few weeks, though, Tory politicians have been determined to throw political satirists out of work. Who needs the likes of Yes Minister or The Thick of It when you can turn on the news and be transported through a spectrum of levity, from titters of disbelief to hysterical mirth? Until he dropped out of a race he hadn`t formally joined, Boris Johnson`s return to Downing Street was a serious possibility. He had left the House of Commons after his last PM`s questions in July with the words `hasta la vista, baby`, and his estranged Svengali, Dominic Cummings, surmised soon afterwards that Johnson backed Truss as his successor because, being well aware of her limitations, he expected to replace her in due course.

Even he was caught on the hop by the speed of her demise, rushing back from a holiday in the Caribbean his third luxury vacation in as many months in an effort to reclaim the top job. It came a cropper, because most Tory MPs weren`t prepared for Boris redux.

Besides, he could soon lose his seat if the Commons committee investigating `Partygate` determines that he misled parliament.

Half-truths, lies, bluffs and bluster have always been part of Johnson`s vocabulary, and the likelihood of him maturing into a serious and responsible PM was always minuscule, but for a variety of unfortunate reasons he did lead the Conservatives to a huge parliamentary majority in 2019 and he will probably be ready to pounce should Sunak blow his chances ahead of 2024, when the next general election is due.

The opposition parties are predictably clamouring for an early election, with polls showing the Tories trailing Labour by 30 to 40 points. But while the moral case for a fresh mandate might be strong, given no one votedfor the shambles that ensued, it`s hard to imagine Tory MPs voluntarily opting for political suicide.

Sunak`s success or failure in rescuing the tanking British economy from the doldrums will determine the fate of his premiership, but the effort will initially be judged by the markets, which were unimpressed by Truss despite her mini-budget`s tax cuts for the rich. As an alumnus of Goldman Sachs and a couple of hedge funds, Sunak will have better ideas about placating the wealth managers, but any empathy for the increasingly povertystricken segments of British society is rather less likely. For them, the relentless farce unfolding at Westminster has been anything but amusing. As former Labour leader Jeremy corbyn pointed out in a Guardian op-ed last week, `more than one in five people and one in three children` live in poverty in Europe`s second richest nation.

The 11-year rule of Margaret Thatcher the very mention of whose name makes present-day Tories, including Sunak and Truss, go weak at the knees was instrumental insetting the template for the trickle-down nonsense that has pervaded Britain`s political economy ever since. Hence the markets remain paramount even as food banks proliferate and anincreasing number of families are forced to choose between eating and heating.

Sooner or later, it`s likely Sunak will be replaced, much like Kwasi Kwarteng and Suella Braverman, by a bland white alternative. Ethnic diversity, in Tory terms, is predicated on extreme-right ideological predilections and it doesn`t trickle down any more than ill-gained wealth.

That alternative may well be Keir Starmer, who has defenestrated the Labour left and positioned himself as a potential PM who will essentially abide by the neoliberal orthodoxy. The recent Al Jazeera documentary The Labour Files demonstrates once more how effectively the Labour establishment strove to neutralise the choice of party members, and subsequently to marginalise the left, including anti-Zionist Jews and anyone who demonstrably empathised with the striking unions.

Sunak may be extraordinarily ill-equipped to deliver the sea change that the British economy requires, but the bigger tragedy is that the opposition offers no transformative alternative. m mahir.dawn@gmail.com