

How did it go so wrong for Britain's Conservatives?

UK's self-inflicted political meltdown explained

The illustration shows British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak fading away. ● GETTY IMAGES



By Joshua Keating
Journalist, author

PERSPECTIVE

If you're looking for electoral suspense, don't look across the pond. Barring a polling error of world historic proportions, 14 years of Conservative rule will come to an end in the United Kingdom on July 4. The question isn't whether Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's party will lose, it's whether anything will be left of them the day after.

Just five years after the Conservatives won their own historic landslide, pollsters are warning that the party faces "electoral extinction." The current forecast from the Economist predicts the opposition Labour Party will win around 431 seats in the 650-seat parliament, up from the 205 they currently hold. That would be the center-left party's biggest majority of the post-war era, eclipsing the landslide 1997 election, when the Tony Blair-led party trounced John Major's Conservatives, ending an 18-year period of Tory dominance. The Conservatives, meanwhile, are projected to fall from 344 seats to just 109. Constituencies that have been loyal Tory bastions for decades are in play.

The party is likely in for a brutal internal battle over its future, with some right-wingers calling for a merger with Trumpian gadfly Nigel Farage's right-wing Reform UK party. Some polls suggest Sunak might become the first ever sitting prime minister to lose his own seat. (Though, he fortunately has a \$7.2 million mansion in Santa Monica, California, to fall back on, which presumably has many seats.)

The Conservatives ended up on the brink of a historic loss the way Hemingway described going bankrupt: Gradually, and then suddenly. The Tories have been underwater in the polls since late 2021, but Sunak only called this election in late May, likely sensing his party's prospects were not likely to improve any time soon.

That's a swift, though not exactly painless, end to a political era that radically changed a country and its place in the world. The consensus view is that it has not changed for the better.

A forthcoming book, *The Conservative Effect, 2010–2024: 14 Wasted Years?*, co-edited by Anthony Seldon,

a veteran chronicler and biographer of contemporary British prime ministers, attempts to take stock of the legacy of this period. Seldon is unsparing in his concluding essay, writing, "By 2024, Britain's standing in the world was lower [compared to 2010], the union was less strong, the country less equal, the population

less well protected, growth more sluggish with the outlook poor." He concludes: "Overall, it is hard to find a comparable period in history of the Conservatives which achieved so little, or which left the country at its conclusion in a more troubling state."

So how, exactly, did we get here?

14 years, five PMs, one Brexit

This 14-year period of Conservative rule is really two different periods: pre- and post-Brexit.

The first period began in 2010, when then-prime minister David Cameron, leading a coalition government consisting of the Conservatives and the centrist Liberal Democrats, moved into 10 Downing Street, ending 13 years of Labour rule under Tony Blair and his dour successor Gordon Brown. Relatively youthful at 44, Cameron, a self-described "liberal conservative," distinguished himself from previous generations of conservatives with stances like his calls for action on climate change.

But his economic policies were anything but moderate. Cameron's government came into office in the wake of the global financial crisis facing a budget deficit of some \$225 billion. In response, the government carried out a program of fiscal consolidation and budget cuts that the UK budget office has described as "one of the biggest deficit reduction programs seen in any advanced economy since World War II." Public spending fell from around 41 percent of GDP to 35 percent, with deep cuts to social programs, infrastructure, and international diplomacy.

Heading into the 2015 election, Cameron was also coming under pressure from the insurgent UK Independence Party, led by Farage, and from his own party's right-flank, to hold a referendum on whether the UK should remain a member of the European Union. Though Cameron personally

opposed withdrawing from the EU, in part to respond to dissidents from his right, he vowed that if he won, he would attempt to renegotiate Britain's relationship with the EU and then, hold an "in/out referendum" on whether Britain should stay.

As a short-term political move, it worked out great. The Conservatives won an overall majority in 2015, ending the coalition era. But Cameron was less successful in convincing Brussels to give Britain "special status" within the EU. Cameron won only minor concessions on sovereignty and immigration. There has always been an undercurrent of Euro-skepticism in British politics, but it grew stronger in the 2000s and 2010s. The financial crisis of 2008 and the eurozone debt crisis that followed undermined the appeal of the EU as an economic union. The unprecedented number of migrants who attempted to reach Europe in 2015 reduced support for the EU's open border policies.

In retrospect, it was a perfect storm for Brexit, but it was still stunning when the country voted 52 to 48 percent in 2016 to leave the EU. Cameron, who had campaigned for the "Remain" side, resigned as prime minister. He was replaced by Theresa May, previously the home secretary and a fellow Remainer, who had the unenviable task of negotiating Britain's withdrawal from the EU while simultaneously presiding over a civil war within her own party over how exactly Brexit should be implemented.

Moderates wanted a "soft Brexit" that would preserve Britain's access to Europe's common market. Hardliners wanted a "hard Brexit" that would prioritize ditching EU regulations and controlling immigration. European negotiators in Brussels were not going to let the Brits have both. Further complicating the process was an issue that few anticipated before the referendum: the economic and political status of Northern Ireland — the only part of the UK with a land border with the EU. Finding a way to avoid a hard border across the island of Ireland — a key pillar of the Northern Irish peace process — while also removing the UK as a whole from the EU turned out to be excruciatingly difficult.

May stepped down in 2019, and after an internal party leadership election, was replaced by former London mayor and omnipresent media figure Boris Johnson. Johnson is not exactly known for holding consistent views. In a 2014 interview for Slate, two years before the Brexit vote, he told me that when it came to the EU, "We may want to change our relationship a bit, but fundamentally we will remain within the European common market." Just a few years later, he would be one of the most visible and enthusiastic campaigners for "Leave".

A few months after taking office, Johnson called a national election, campaigning on a pledge to "get Brexit done" — and won a landslide victory. It didn't hurt that Labour at the time was led by the veteran

left-winger Jeremy Corbyn, who had both failed to take a strong stance on Brexit and was beset by accusations of anti-semitism.

Armed with his new large majority, Johnson did something unusual for him: He did what he said he would do and indeed got Brexit done. Britain formally left the EU on January 31, 2020. Just two years later, however, Johnson left as well, forced to resign over a scandal over allegations that he misled parliament over parties held in his office during Covid-19 lockdowns.

That was followed by the 50-day reign of Prime Minister Liz Truss, which was the shortest in British history — so short, in fact, that she was famously outlasted by a head of lettuce. Truss is mainly remembered for a proposed set of tax cuts so extreme it triggered weeks of panic in global bond markets and the kind of upbraiding from the IMF normally reserved for failed states.

Truss was then replaced by Sunak, who made history as the first prime minister of Asian descent, as well as the youngest one since William Pitt (the Younger, of course) in 1783. Under Sunak, the lingering effects of the pandemic and the shock to energy markets caused by the war in Ukraine have contributed to a cost-of-living crisis that has disproportionately impacted the poorest Britons. Sunak has tried to make the case that the UK economy is turning the corner — and indeed inflation is now starting to ease — but it's almost certainly too little too late.