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## Rishi Sunak's brand of conservatism during PMQs

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## **Seminar: Liberalism and Conservatism at Crossroads**

Le vendredi 13 décembre de 14h à 16h dans les locaux parisiens de CY Cergy Paris Université : CY EPPS (92 rue Notre Dame des Champs, Paris 6e), salle PICASSO.

Organisé par les laboratoires AGORA (CY Cergy Paris Université), BABEL (Université de Toulon), CREW (Université Sorbonne Nouvelle), ICD (Université de Tours) et TIL (Université de Bourgogne)

### **Rishi Sunak's brand of conservatism during PMQS**

As Prime Minister, one of Rishi Sunak's most arduous challenges was to unite a divided party while trying to implement his own policies. The weekly theatre of Prime Minister's Questions provides an insight into how Rishi Sunak sought to meet this political challenge. PMQs are an efficient tool to promote one's policies and ideology in so far as it is one of the most watched and attended parliamentary events of the week. The "uneasy" questions (even attacks) from the Opposition and more importantly those from the Conservative backbenchers provide a more nuanced version of the PM's achievements and ideological principles. This presentation aims to highlight Rishi Sunak's doctrinal orientation through the qualitative study of some specific rhetorical effects like the use of "mantras" (repeated phrases) in his speeches at the dispatch box. This methodological approach sheds light on Rishi Sunak's brand of conservatism, tracing its roots to a lexical and semantic genealogical relationship with his predecessors' rhetorical techniques and to the dynamics within the Conservative Party.

Stéphane Revillet est docteur en civilisation britannique contemporaine et membre du laboratoire TIL à l'Université de Bourgogne. Ses domaines de recherche sont le leadership politique, le parlement britannique et le parti conservateur. Sa thèse, soutenue en 2023, s'intitule *L'expression du leadership des Premiers ministres conservateurs pendant les PMQs de 1990 à 2019*.

<https://til.u-bourgogne.fr/membres/revillet-stephane/>

**Presented by Stéphane REVILLET**

### **INTRODUCTION**

I'd like to thank you for inviting me to participate in your seminars on liberalism and conservatism. Today, as the title of my presentation suggests, I'm going to talk about Rishi Sunak's brand of conservatism during Prime Minister's Questions. Or rather, I'll be trying to determine whether there is something special about R Sunak's approach to conservatism that would make it his own brand.

Not an easy task because Defining the brand of conservatism of a particular prime minister is quite challenging in that it requires a detailed analysis of all the prime minister's policies, decisions, speeches and writings in comparison with those of his

or her predecessor, while testing them against the founding (and evolving) principles of conservatism. To add to the challenge, the end of Rishi Sunak's premiership is recent and his premiership is still being evaluated by political pundits and scholars. However, a number of scholarly books have been published: among them

- Anthony Seldon and Tom Egerton : "The Conservative effect 2010-2024"
- Another book is worth mentioning : "All to play for : The advance of rishi Sunak" by Michael Ashcroft .

-> Such works provide a valuable insight into Sunak's politics and decision-making.

The purpose of today's presentation is not to examine how his actions, decisions, failures or successes synthesise into a particular type of conservatism. The purpose of this study is to use a narrow framework, within which certain rhetorical / speech features emerge, to highlight some characteristics of Sunak's conservatism. This framework = **PMQs**

WHY?

- a promotional platform (= one of the most watched and attended events of the parliamentary week

- a confrontational and constrained mode of communication (holding the government to account is intrinsically confrontational, helping to reveal other aspects of the government's policy/ideology)

- More interestingly, PMQs = one of the very few events where the PM, and MPs attend the same session → the PM needs to address and convince both the Conservative Parliamentary party and the public outside = not a free ride speech as is often the case in a party conference. These constraints represent an efficient way of evaluating the PM's (re)-presentation of his political views and action.

## **Methodology**

**57 PMQS sessions from 26/10/2022 to May 2024= Sunak's premiership**

Dramatization / Theatrical elements

The study is based on the elements of the Prime Minister's and MPs' speeches that stand out or are designed to make an impression (the more dramatized / theatrical elements). The high degree of theatricality of PMQs is a way of signalling to the audience (intra+extra-parliamentary audience) that some elements (of my speech) are more important than others and as such should be given greater attention.

Once these elements are extracted from the discursive content of PMQs, they constitute a kind of sub-discursive or para-discursive structure that provides valuable clues about the messages the speaker (PM or MP) intends to convey revealing a kind of map of the PM's principles

These elements are striking because they are:

- **mantras** – repetitions / formulas, catchy phrases / answers with dramatic effects – unusual and striking phrases

Sunak's most repeated phrases / words :

→ "(support) the most vulnerable"

→ (Labour's) £28bn borrowing + £900 support

→ "small boats"

→ "protect the green belt"

- (Use of) **symbols**

- Finally: (other elements that are striking) **attacks** from the PM but also and more importantly from the conservative MPs= FTAs (Face Threatening or attacking acts ranging from sarcasm to insults) = which are very efficient attention getters

The most common attacks used by Conservative Prime Ministers are those aimed at the Labour Party. Anti-labour rhetoric

### 1. Anti-labour

What is interesting here is the nature of these attacks, which are used as a counter-definition of conservatism like a mirror image of the attacker's principles and ethos. In such a context, the Conservatives define their identity against that of their main opponents. One major aspect of the Labour party that the conservative have steadfastly rejected is socialism

- **Anti-socialism**: one of the founding principles of modern Conservatism .

In her book, *Les conservateurs britanniques ds la Bataille des idées 1929- 1954*, Clarisse Berthezène provide an analysis of the origins of anti-socialism as the motto of the Conservative party, she concludes by saying that from 1918 onwards, the Conservatives decided to stop using the term "Labour" and replace it with the term "socialist" laden with undertones of foreign ideology. ] Still the case today

Anti-socialist sentiment has always pervaded Conservative PMs' speeches.

→ EX: "*have the chance to remove the anti-business **socialist Scrooges***" (03/05/2023) + *not back into EU by a **socialist gvt*** (21/02/24).

These attacks on socialism imply a total rejection of what socialism stands for: anti-business and support of supra institutions that stifle trade , and socialism stands for "borrowing" (too much) = mantra : £28bn

→ not new = similar attacks during Thatcher, Major and Cameron's tenures= Socialism has become a negative symbol among Conservatives.

All Sunak had to do is to reactivate it.

*The Scrooges* and *the socialist gvt* referred to in the previous statements are embodied by the Labour = the 2 merge and can be used interchangeably

The negative element contained in the anti-labour symbol is an old one : ie, being guilty of “borrowing too much \$”:is well rendered in One of Sunak’s mantras :Labour’s plan is “**28 bn borrowing**”

“£ 28bn borrowing” is one phrase that Sunak repeatedly uses in reference to Labour’s economic policies that “bankrupt our eco (10/05/2023)”. It is striking how many times he uses it

----→ the purpose of which is to insist on what he believes in, economically speaking = i.e, **not** borrowing but cutting spending instead (a way of not explicitly saying things)

The purpose of all this effort to paint Labour in a negative light is to discredit them on anything to do with the economy, while implicitly praising the Cons' competence in this area, namely by not borrowing but cutting (public) spending

In his attempt to undermine Labour's credibility, the PM goes one step further in his attacks to make Labour look evil by **demonizing** the opponent through moral disqualification + proving they are a threat to the country ... Labour is the enemy.

**How?**

→**By associating them with Extremists:**

EXAMPLES --→ Corbyn = Hamas (15/11/2023) + “he chooses the criminal gangs over the British people every time (10/01/2024) + “the extremists’ own press release said, and I quote, “the Hizb ut-Tahrir legal team, led by Keir Starmer”. I know that he does not like talking about them because they have been a client, but when I see a group chanting “jihad” on our streets, I ban them; he invoices them. [Interruption.]” (17/01/24, vol 743, col 821)+ **defend terrorists** (07/02/24) + **anti-semitic** grp Hizb-ut-Tahrir and represents terrorists (20/03/24+ 17/04/24) + **siding with our enemies** (17/04/24)

→**Starmer / Labour = is the enemy from within acting against the interest of the nation**

Europe = “Labour will back Brussels over Britain” + on side of Europe (06/12/2023) ≠ Cons

Starmer = “wanted to abolish Monarchy when he was 40” (10/05/23) + 14/01/24 => not on the side of the nation

→**To make the attacks even more noticeable and more likely to be picked up by the media = The PM resorts to ad hominen attacks = personal attacks** (=>

Starmer = “Sir Flaky + Sir Softy” = on crime (10/05/23) ≠ suggesting that Cons are tough on crime (in fact, it is a reaction to Labour’s series of digital “attack” adverts in which Sunak was personally targeted as being soft on crime)

Another personal attack is worth mentioning because it is one of the most striking / noticeable :

*“Starmer is just a **lefty lawyer** standing in our way” + **lefty lawyers** (08/03/23+ 17/01/2024)*

*->“he (Starmer) voted against measures to deport foreign criminals, and he even argued against deportation flights. We know why, because on this matter—he talked about his legal background—he is just another **lefty lawyer** standing in our way” 08/03/2023 vol 729, col 296*

In a syllogistic trick anyone or anything associated with Labour is demonised / evil (enthymeme a 2-term syllogism because the 3<sup>rd</sup> element is implied)

↳ Labour = socialist = Keir Starmer is (Labour) & Lawyer = so lefty lawyers = (Labour) lefty lawyers in the court and civil service who stand in the way.

This is an illustration of the power of symbols

**Lefty lawyers** are another avatar of the previously identified socialist enemy:

→ = **enemies of the people** / the nation / the country

The system is paralysed by “lefty lawyers” who place the interests of the migrants above those of the country = Labour = anti-nationalists

Same thing / line of reasoning with civil servants and officials who “stand in the gvt’s way” stopping them from solving the immigration issue: They are portrayed as **militant civil servant and trade union political activists** who refuse to implement the Parliament’s laws and who should seek employment at other **left-wing organisations that masquerade as being impartial**. Maybe they could try the BBC or “Channel 4 News”.

->not new = in march 2022 “...because otherwise the blob will win and we will fail to deliver a key benefit of Brexit, 02/03/2022, vol. 709 , col.1041, Penrose) = the Blob = obstacle to Brexit then to Immigration plans/policies)

An other category of people “standing in the way” is targeted: “the **guilt-ridden bourgeois liberals and greed-driven globalists**, the same kind of those who are stymieing the PM’s stop the boats campaign” (29/11/2023)

=> **the enemy** = a blend of the “anywhere” (David Goodhart) , globalists, the administrative elite, ideologues like socialists = in other words everything and everyone that “stands in the gvt’s way” has become an enemy = evidencing an **authoritarian position**

= Karine Tournier – Sol : in this presentation of the enemy versus the party on the side of the British people, PM fits both vertical dichotomy (elite v people) and horizontal one (progressive liberals v authoritarian nationalism) = extension of the definition of the enemy (what is new here is the number and the variety of the people “standing in their way”)

**Conclusion / transition** : What emerges from Sunak’s anti-labour attacks during PMQs is that anti-socialism is damaging to the economy and the interests of the

nation. But this is nothing new, as we can see from his predecessors. At this stage we can already assume that Sunak is no iconoclast nor a pioneer

## 2. Continuity – Evolution without disruption: Walking on a tight rope

When it comes to anti-socialism, the Conservatives do not tone down their attacks = anti-socialism/labour is a cornerstone of conservatism and such a rhetoric is expected. However, on the question of the size and role of the state, i.e.,: whether there should be a limited or extended state Sunak is more cautious. His position on this issue is best illustrated by a phrase he uses extensively and maybe too extensively

The most repeated phrase of his premiership during PMQs: **“the most vulnerable”**  
--> ex: *protect the most vulnerable / gvt who have the most vulnerable at our hearts / look after the most vulnerable in our society / the most vulnerable families / the most vulnerable around the world / the most vulnerable school, children, customers, ...*

In fact, Sunak is targeting a group of people that is both specific (rendered by “the most” and unidentified (what vulnerability are we talking about? Eco., social, medical, ...), this is what Murray Edelman (was an American political scientist known for his research on symbolic politics) calls a reference group → not new, quite a common device. The “most vulnerable” hasn’t been created ex nihilo/ from scratch, it is an avatar of some previous reference groups. Reconstructing the genealogy of the term “the most vulnerable” provides a better understanding of the term and its implications. As I said, The idiom “the most vulnerable” comes from earlier reference groups, it goes all the way back to Cameron’s mantra : “hardworking people”, basically it suggests that it is the duty of the government to help/support all those who fall into this category of people.

### David Cameron

The group of people D. Cameron specifically and intensively targets during PMQs is **“the hard-working” people/families**, and the government’s efforts to help people ‘with childcare’ or ‘with their budgets and needs’ ‘or with their pensions’ seem limited because this help is subject to strict eligibility conditions: namely, being in work.

Cameron undoubtedly establishes some sort of **means-tests** making work the only criteria (qualification) to be eligible, re-igniting the notion of the deserving poor<sup>1</sup> and claiming that the “best route out of poverty is work”. Making a distinction between those who deserve help = workers (strivers) and those who don’t (shirkers living off benefits)

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<sup>1</sup> La *Poor Law* de 1834 faisait la distinction entre les pauvres méritants et les pauvres non-méritants. La première catégorie comprenait ceux qui, pour des raisons indépendantes de leur volonté (comme le handicap, la vieillesse, la maladie) ne pouvaient pas subvenir à leurs propres besoins. La seconde catégorie regroupait ceux qui étaient sans emploi et qui étaient considérés comme des « bons à rien », des « tire-au-flanc » qui représentaient un fardeau pour leur communauté et qui méritaient le plus sévère des traitements. Editorial, [Malcolm Golightley](#), [Margaret Holloway](#), *The British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 46, Issue 1, January 2016, Pages 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw001>

Basically, D Cameron's category of "hardworking people" is predominantly class based, he is clearly targeting the working class who feel they have been "left behind" and who will "do the right thing" to get into work and get by = the focus is on the notion of personal responsibility rather than reliance on state benefits.

### **Theresa May**

There is continuity with D. Cameron = the "hard-working families", who need help, become "ordinary working families" and "the best route out of poverty is work" too .

Over the course of her premiership, the ordinary working families merge with the "Just About Managing" (JAMs). => those who "struggle to make ends meet", who "find life is a struggle", who "are barely coping at all, who "are struggling to get by"... who "work to provide for themselves"...

The requirements for people to deserve state support have evolved from being a hard-working individual to living just below the poverty line, however, the economic situation of the people is the primary concern of the two PMs. With T May, the role of the state has been redefined rhetorically speaking at least (= hard work is not the only criteria to evaluate an individual's need of support) so much so that : A conservative MP Philip Davies asks T May if he may "paraphrase our former colleague, the late, great Eric Forth? ] Prime Minister, I believe in the free market, I believe in individual freedom and individual responsibility, and I am suspicious of the nanny state. Am I still a Conservative ?"- 23/05/2018

### **Boris Johnson**

Under B. Johnson, hard-working families + JAMs have become the 'left behind'. Unlike his predecessors, who were concerned with the economic situation of JAMs, B Johnson's left behind refers to geographically disadvantaged places (although concern for the Black Country permeated May's speeches).

Examples -> "invest in places that for decades were left behind" (20/07/2022) + "rural areas" (15/09/2021) + Stoke-on-Trent (21/10/2020) + the Midlands (30/09/2020) + Ashfield and Eastwood, Nottinghamshire + Bridgend (05/02/2020)

The emphasis on places rather than on people and communities is to be understood in the context of the implementation of the levelling up policies mainly in reference to the need of investment in those places. The effort of the gvt lies in the necessity to bridge the gap (whatever the gap is) between regions in the UK. More broadly everyone can be a "left behind" even residents in the Cotswolds who do not have broadband service

The Left behind has become a mythical population par excellence. The function of the mythical population (Murray Edelman) is to evoke a reference group other than the plainly visible and identified segment of the population)

### **Rishi Sunak**



With Rishi Sunak, “the left-behind” are now referred to as “the most vulnerable”. R Sunak’s idiom places a premium on people rather than places: they are “the most vulnerable in our society”, “the most vulnerable families/children/constituents”...

The references to the most vulnerable extends to those living in “Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan or elsewhere ” [“It is precisely because we want to help the most vulnerable people, whether they be in Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan or elsewhere, and target our resources and compassion on those who most need them.”, 03/05/2023 vol.732, col 109) and eventually to the whole world because according to R. Sunak “compassion must be targeted at the world’s most vulnerable ”.

Sometimes these limits sound a bit nonsensical: The most vulnerable in NI need devolved gvt urgently ( 13/12/2023) → Do other more fortunate NI people not need a devolved gvt?

Rishi Sunak’s phrase is an overt echo to Cameron’s rhetoric ->the use of the term “the most vulnerable” is embedded in a speech reminiscent of David Cameron’s terminology, laying emphasis on a gvt and a party which are “fair” and “compassionate”, and which “will support hard-working nurses” and “the most vulnerable”. Cameron’s extensive use of « compassionate » for almost everything (the, gvt, party, the country...) is reactivated by Sunak who also uses this adjective in the same way :

→ the most vulnerable must be helped in a compassionate and fair way.

- ***Our compassionate party protect the most vulnerable*** (26/10/2022)

- *As I committed to previously, as we approach the difficult decisions that confront us, we will do so in a way that is **fair and compassionate*** (26/10/2022)

- *a fair and **compassionate gvt** who have the most vulnerable at our hearts*

- *but it is a point of pride that we are a **compassionate country** that does welcome people from around the world* (06/12/2023, vol 742, col 330)

- *my constituents and people up and down the country would expect the Government to seek to recover overpaid sums. We need to do that **in a compassionate way**, and if people are struggling to make repayments...* (24/04/2024, vol 748, col 936 )

-> very One Nation rhetoric. And to prove his gvt’s compassion Sunak keeps repeating during PMQs that he gave **£900** to the most vulnerable (whether it is a rise in state pensions, direct payments, tax cuts, on energy bills, cost-of-living payments, cut taxes by 900£ for everyone in work)

The comparison with D Cameron’s mantra and his approach to State support goes one step further: Although the gvt’s support to the world’s most vulnerable does not seem to be subject to specific conditions, Sunak does set a limit to the gvt’s compassion, fairness and assistance

→ the superlative “the most”, while being a linguistic instrument for dramatization, is indicative of a limit to the gvt’s support, some kind of requirements to be met to be granted gvt’s help (i.e., this time the “just” vulnerable (JAM) are not worthy of gvt’s assistance) = indication that a specific level of vulnerability is required → work is also

a requirement for the most vulnerable (the best poverty strategy is to have everybody in work, 22/02/2023). “A country where hard work is rewarded” (13/03/2024) = Work should take precedence over benefits : 10/01/2024 : « we have a plan to get people off welfare and into work”= a continuation of Cameron’s message prioritising hard work

-> Hansard, HC, 15/06/2011, vol. 529, col. 769. D. Cameron: [...] it cannot be right for some families to get more the £26,000 a year in benefits that are paid for by people who are working hard and paying their taxes.+ David Cameron, during a PMQs session in 2012 : “we back the workers, they back the shirkers” .

Ironically, the gvt’s assistance and compassion do not apply to migrants risking their lives to cross the channel= The “stop the boats” campaign is not the best illustration of the gvt’s compassion at the world’s most vulnerable

Interestingly, Sunak presents the compassionate face of the gvt in a way reminiscent of Cameron's One Nation conservatism without clearly claiming it (no mention is made of One Nation, he does not want to imply that he would be in favour of a big state). The implicit limits on government support for the most vulnerable are a kind of “dog whistle” to the more conservative fringe of the party.

Sunak's mantra: "The most vulnerable", while being in line with his predecessors, represents a further step in the evolving definitional contours of the group, without breaking away from the other groups previously used. However, it is clear that Sunak is much closer to Cameron in his rhetoric and articulation of Conservative principles than to any of his predecessors.

On economic issues, Sunak's is careful to avoid direct references to austerity, public spending cuts, fiscal orthodoxy or a more limited state. Instead, he relies on a well-crafted rhetoric based on ambiguity and double meanings. However, he is more straightforward and explicit when it comes to social issues such as gender, trans rights... which puts him more in line with Boris Johnson's 'war on the woke'.

Now let's move on to other elements that will catch the audience's attention, elements that act as signals to the audience

### **Culture war = « war on woke »**

For a better understanding of what this term means read the very insightful article by Karine Tournier-Sol entitled « La droite britannique et les guerres culturelles », (Observatoire de la société britannique) 31 | 2024

She says that the term “culture wars” has become a kind of umbrella word for other notions like wokeism, political correctness, cancel culture and progressivism ...

The /pə'li:s.i.mi/ polysemy of the term is well rendered in one of Sunak’s statement :

Sunak claimed in the summer 2022 that : “I want to stand up to that lefty woke culture that seems to want to cancel our history, our values, our women” summer 2022?

Sunak is Following in Johnson’s footsteps and his so-called “war on woke”

On this issue, Sunak’s strategy was to hit hard, using PMQs to promote his anti-woke position. Some of his remarks/comments/answers have been picked up by the media and caused controversy.

### **a- political correctness and cancel culture**

*26/04/2023 Vol . 731, Col 731. Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Streatham) (Lab) [...] Will the Prime Minister do what Bernie Grant asked all those years ago, and what I and countless others have asked since, by offering a full and **meaningful apology for our country’s role in slavery and colonialism**, and committing to reparatory justice? (904690)*

*The Prime Minister: No, what I think our focus should now be on doing, while of course understanding our history in all its parts and not running away from it, is making sure that we have a society that is inclusive and tolerant of people from all backgrounds. That is something that we on the Government Benches are committed to doing and will continue to deliver, but **trying to unpick our history** is not the right way forward and is not something we will focus our energies on.*

->Picked up by the medias => making the headlines. Sunak’s refusal to cancel parts of UK ‘s past and history = The Guardian / The BBC: “R Sunak refuses to apologise for UK slave trade ....”

*24/01/24 : K Starmer ... who wanted to abolish the monarchy and who still not know what a woman is. [...] backed teaching **divisive white privilege** in our schools*

->Implicitly supporting white backlash against “white privilege” rhetoric = fuelling reverse racism

*- 24 / 05 / 2023 : vol. col 288 Robbie Moore: I want to see a full Rotherham-style review of child exploitation across my area, but Bradford Council’s leader and our West Yorkshire Mayor both refuse to back one, because **political correctness** is getting in the way, simply sweeping the issue under the carpet.*

*The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend for campaigning on this? As I have said before, we should not let **political correctness** stand in the way of keeping vulnerable girls safe or of holding people to account.*

=> refusing to name the perpetrators of a crime for fear of fuelling anti-immigrant sentiment is blamed for increasing insecurity → political correctness here is seen as an obstacle even a threat to the protection/safety of the citizens

Maybe the harder line Sunak takes on wokeism is related to transpeople’s rights. On this issue, he uses a combination of humour, sarcasm and insults. He definitely wants to attract more attention on this very point.

### **b- trans rights**

- 18/01/2023 : S Flynn => conservatives party : stoke a culture war + Gvt opposed Gender Recognition Reform Bill col 358

- 26/04/2023 : I'm certain **what a woman is. Is he?**

10/01/2024: vol 743, col 293. PM: I also agree that those championing safety or talking about the importance **of biological sex** should absolutely have the freedom to express those views. She will see those views expressed in the guidance too.

24/01/24 : K Starmer ... who wanted to abolish the monarchy and **who still not know what a woman is.** [...] backed teaching divisive white privilege in our schools

07/02/2024: broken promises... **defining a woman** –although, in fairness, that was only 99% of a U-turn ---

!!!!-----> Starmer has previously said “99.9%” of women do not have penises->pb, Briana’s mother was in the gallery (a teenage trans girl murder)= scandal

21/02/2024: PM -> support LGBT community and those who are questioning their gender and identity but highlight the importance **of biological sex**...nobody should be demonised for that

17/04/2024: PM Scotland wasting time cracking down on **free speech and trying to lock up J K Rowling**

-> The message : political correctness and wokeism are a threat to freedom of speech and freedom

Although not using the term “woke”, Sunak sends a clear anti-woke message by presenting the major features of anti-woke activism : undermine the cancel culture and progressivism and to end political correctness.

Wokeism is used as a notion with broad, flexible and evolving definitional boundaries. Sunak avoids a precise definition. This is what Daniel Chandler calls a floating signifier = "a signifier with a vague, highly variable, unspecifiable or non-existent signified".

I would go one step further and call it a symbol. Sunak’s aim is to (try to) turn the term into a negative symbol. A symbol is characterised by its multivocality (different meanings for different people), its ambiguity and flexibility and most of all it raises a wide range of emotions that take precedence over rationality. Its force derives from the strong emotions it raises and from other symbols associated with it.

Sunak endows this notion with negative meanings and significance and emotions. A threat to security, to collective memory, to the country’s past, to unity, to freedom of speech. To create a symbol one needs to make an impression with the term used, that is why Sunak uses PMQs and a high degree of dramatization.

However, weaponizing social changes is not a new trend, this is nothing new, as Thatcher, in her time, waged a moral battle against schools and more generally

against the changing moral standards of society: “children who need to be taught to respect traditional moral values are being taught that they have an inalienable right to be gay” (Party conference 1987)

John Major too = Hansard, HC, 02/03/1993, vol. 220, col. 137. Mrs Sheperd: the schools were hijacked in the 1960s and 1970s by the trendy lefties? Is not it clear that now that those pupils who had been hijacked are parents, they are unable to give their families the moral base to know what is right and wrong today?

What is different is the intensity / the priority given to such a rhetoric in the party's political communication

It may be a culture war but above all it is a political war = same mechanism as with socialism = the aim is to create a negative symbol and associate it with Labour through a syllogistic mechanism thereby creating a political identity divide between two political groups.

**Another mantra is worth being commented upon : “stop the small boats”** gives further indication on Sunak's policy and views on **IMMIGRATION**

The gvt's action to fight against illegal immigration is symbolized by “stop the **small boats** » policy. The phrase: « stop the small boats » (repeated ad nauseam) sums up the gvt's priority = i.e, « protect borders and end illegal migration » 09/11/2022 => The Illegal Migration Act, 2023 is nicknamed” Stop the boats Bill”=

- Sunak supports his own policy through an anti-immigrant rhetoric :

**economic reasons:** Migrants accommodated in hotels + hotels for asylum seekers is wrong + costs \$ (30/11/2022, 07/12/22, 26/04/23)

### **Welfare racism**

*We must stop our system being exploited and overwhelmed by illegal migrants (08/03/2023) + economic migration = strain on public services (06/12/2023) + not right that some people jump the queue and take away our resources from those who need our help most (17/01/24?) + bringing dependants to the UK must be able to support them financially, not at taxpayers' expense (13/12/23) => not new* Cameron + May used the same rhetoric

**HOWEVER** (what is new, during PMQs, is): Justification of cracking down on illegal migration is that it is “ the fair and compassionate thing to do is to stop the boats (17/01/24) “in a fair and compassionate way”

### **↳Moral argument:**

Illegal immigration relies on (/ is the result of) an immoral, criminal, deadly system = gangs, people smugglers take advantage of vulnerable people, taking their money for a crossing that in some cases would cause their death.

Well-structured demonstration : Who and what – Consq – immoral – duty to stop – gvt is the solution

- PM: It is precisely because we want to help the world's most vulnerable people that we must stop our system being exploited and overwhelmed by **illegal migrants who are being trafficked here by criminal gangs**. **There is nothing compassionate or fair about supporting that system continuing**, which is why our new laws are the right way to deal with this
- Col 299: There is nothing fair and there is nothing compassionate about sustaining a system in which, as we saw recently, **people are dying on these crossings**. That is not right, and **our plans will stop that from happening**. [Interruption.]
- 08/05/2024 PM: My right hon. Friend is right that **these crossings are incredibly dangerous and risk people's lives**. Just weeks ago, a seven-year-old girl died attempting a crossing. That is why, as a matter of basic compassion, we must do everything **we can to break the cycle of the criminal gangs**. That is why we need a deterrent.
- 13/03/2024: ... need to **end the unfairness of illegal immigration**
- 08/03/2023 PM ...the numbers are escalating to the extent they are that we have brought forward new plans, and because we are determined to ensure that this **remains a compassionate and generous country and that that is done fairly and legally**. **That is why we will break the criminal gangs**.

Those who are really responsible for this inhumane system is the Labour = The Labour party is on the side of people smugglers +illegal immigration+ Labour in Wales are paying illegal immigrants 19/04/2023

Immigration perceived as detrimental to the country and the Labour is associated with it = open-door immigration / unlimited asylum / + welcome illegal migrants more and more + listen to open-border activists (15/11/2023) + anti-border control ...

-> **the SAVIOUR is** the Conservative gvt => **use of the myth** in a process of derealisation and simplification of the political world. World organised in a binary way = the evil plotters and the benevolent saviours = pattern of the narrative= creation of a pb, cause (the ones to blame), the solution) = storytelling

-> This is a way of presenting the gvt's principles in **simplistic and oversimplified way**. REF= Edelman Murray, Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence, New York, Academic Press, 1971, p. 77

So far, I've tried to get a better grasp of Sunak's brand of conservatism through some of his mantras, through FTAs or elements made more visible through dramatization. However, A more direct way of getting an insight into the PM's doctrinal principles is to use his own definition of those principles or the FTAs coming from conservative MPs

### 3. Self-definition and MPs' evaluation of Rishi Sunak's conservatism

=> in the context of the negotiations of what would become the Windsor framework (27/02/2023 Ursula Von Der Leyen visited London to finalize the agreement) Sunak stated that "I am a **Conservative, a Brexiter and a Unionist** (22/02/2023, vol. col. 217). This statement suggests that two seemingly antagonistic stances (Brexiteers supporting an exit from the EU that could potentially weaken the Union) can be reunited within the ethos of the Conservative party.

In this case, Sunak is a self-proclaimed Brexiter and unionist but he does not prove it by dramatizing his speech during PMQs = no mantras, or catchy phrases, only a few mentions. In this case, Sunak does not promote one aspect of his policy or doctrinal orientation through a rhetorical device, but he is in **the defensive mode**, forced to reaffirm his beliefs or rather those of the party.

**A unionist** = certainly

→ **Scotland is stronger** in the UK ( 17/04/2024) = In response to Stephen Flynn (Leader of the Scottish National Party in the House of Commons) pushing for a new Scottish referendum

+ **NI is better in the Union** (20/03/2024) "NI's place in **our precious Union** (22/02/2023, col 218)

----> Sunak does not use a mantra to hammer a message. Why? Because being a unionist is intrinsically Conservative = Not a new position that requires promotion or rhetorical device. He will prove it through his actions : ex:

**[Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill** = 18/01/2023, vol col 358

*S Flynn: "Surely in that context, the Prime Minister must recognise that it is a dangerous moment for devolution when both he and, indeed, the Leader of the Opposition seek to overturn a promise made between Scotland's politicians and Scotland's people."*

*PM: This Bill would have a significant adverse effect on UK-wide equalities matters, so the Scottish Secretary, with regret, has rightly acted.*

Bill: designed to streamline the process in Scotland for changing legal gender = Lowering the age that people can apply for a gender recognition certificate + removing the requirement for a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria.

Section 35 of the Scotland Act (1998) = if ministers think that a Holyrood bill would modify laws reserved to Westminster and have an adverse effect on how those laws apply, then they can block it by issuing a Section 35 order. First time section 35 has been used.

In this case it would have affected the Equality Act (ex: the government highlighted the impact of creating **two parallel regimes** for Gender Recognition Certificates (GRCs). Any Scottish GRC issued under the bill's terms would not automatically have legal effect outside of Scots law. Second, the government argued that the bill would create increased potential for fraudulent applications for GRCs, for instance due to the removal of the requirement for a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria, which could undermine the safety of women and girls in single-sex spaces.]

Analysis= The creation of two regimes in and outside Scotland on reserved matters (Equality Act) would have created a precedent that would have threatened the Union and perhaps been a step further towards the granting of a vote on the Scottish independence. The precedent (ie to use section 35) is evidence of a strengthening of the Union (reasserting a more "muscular unionism" = Fiona Simpkins) and a reaffirmation of the anti-woke position).

= killing 2 birds with one stone ]

### **A Brexiter:**

→ *It is this Government who are delivering the benefits of Brexit to every part of our country, and long may that continue.* (15/11/2023, vol. 740 col. 648) = one of the few explicit statement supporting Brexit

→ **Defensive mode** again:

When accused by Starmer of wanting "a closer relationship with the EU Sunak claims that

*Sunak: "I will not let a foreign court block our ability to send ple to Rwanda"(13/03/2024)*

=> Use a Eurosceptic tone to counter accusations of getting closer to EU and to reassure DUP and Brexiter

→ On this defensive mode, Sunak intensifies his attacks against Labour, as if it was his last resort, by using a word that has been laden with symbolic meanings by his own group. The only time he uses a rhetorical device for effect in relation to being a Brexiter

Short of arguments, Sunak attacks Starmer and invokes B Johnson's euroscepticism using one of his famous phrase:

PM ... It is his usual position when it comes to the European Union—give the EU a blank cheque and agree to anything it offers. It is not a strategy; **that is surrender.**

-> There is no denying that he used this expression for effect : That is surrender = If we make the genealogy of the term from Churchill to Boris Johnson, we realize that it is a symbol of resistance to the "diktats" of the EU =symbol of euroscepticism. Again, Sunak uses a symbol that has already been created by Churchill and reloaded by Boris Johnson to assert his Eurosceptic stance without wasting a lot of resources.

**(finally) A Conservative** = In this example, Sunak equates being a Conservative with being a Brexiter and a Unionist, but this is a limited view of what it means to be a Conservative. One way to find out is to look at the comments and attacks of Conservative MPs.

### **Conservative MPs' assessment of Sunak's conservatism**



This definition of Sunak's brand of conservatism can also derive from the Conservative MPs' attacks on the PM = face-threatening acts, either attacks on the positive or negative face of the PM (basically a verbal attack on the speaker's reputation, on the image he wants to project or on his freedom of action, forcing him to act). These FTAs are quite common from MPs trying to defend the interests of their constituents and asking the PM to take action. However, when these FTAs are directed personally at the PM or at the policies of the gvt, they do not go unnoticed (more often than not they are orchestrated = humour, strong words, insults...) and are therefore very useful to gain more insight into a PM's leadership and principles, and that is particularly true during PMQs when unity must prevail

### **1<sup>st</sup> = Immigration policies :**

→ An MP, Scott Benton wants firm(er) action from the PM on immigration:

*02/11/2022, vol. 721, col 863. Scott Benton (Cons) : Q12. Nearly 40,000 illegal immigrants have crossed the channel so far this year, landing taxpayers with a hotel bill of £5.6 million per day to accommodate them...When can we expect **the firm action** that the British people are demanding?*

### **UK- EU relationship =**

→ another MP, William Cash, reminds R Sunak of the priority of protecting UK's parliamentary sovereignty, self-gvt and democracy as set out in the 2019 manifesto:

*William Cash (Cons) Will my right hon. Friend give the House an assurance that he has made it clear to the new Foreign Secretary (D Cameron), who of course we wish well, that his policy and conduct of EU-related affairs will be consistent with the Government's 2019 election manifesto and the referendum and that he is now **fully committed to UK parliamentary sovereignty, self-government and democracy in accordance with the Government's subsequent legislation**? (15/11/2023, vol. 740 col. 648)*

→ Andrea Jenkyns wants the PM to commit to leaving the ECHR:

*13/03/2024, vol. 747, col 296, Dame Andrea Jenkyns: I understand that the latest scheme being considered is to pay migrants thousands of pounds to leave Britain. **Let us just leave the European convention on human rights and deport them for free.** So far, more than 40,000 Brits have signed my petition with the Conservative Post calling for us to leave the ECHR. **Will the Prime Minister commit to leaving the ECHR** or, at the very least, have it in our manifesto to have a referendum and let Britain decide?*

*PM: As I have said repeatedly and will happily say to her again, I will not let a foreign court block our ability to send people to Rwanda when the time comes.*

-> he doesn't promise anything. He leaves multiple possible interpretations.

→ Andrew Rosindell echoes William Cash and Scott Benton's calls for a tough approach to immigration and a restoration of sovereignty lost to the EU institutions and urges him to show more of his Thatcherite instincts.

21/02/2024 , vol. 745, col. 707 *Andrew Rosindell: I have had the privilege to be spending a lot of time with the law-abiding, tax-paying, hard-working patriotic people of Romford in recent months, and they have been telling me what they think. Does the Prime Minister agree with the people of Romford that we need a **radical plan to control immigration and stop illegal immigration, to regain sovereignty over our human rights laws in this country**, to tell the Mayor of London that we **need more police to stop crime** in the London Borough of Havering, and a fair funding settlement for Havering? **Will the Prime Minister come with me to Romford market, following the footsteps of Margaret Thatcher**, and meet the people of Romford? One thing I can tell him they **do not want is to be taken back into the European Union by a socialist Government.***

This implies that Thatcher should be Sunak's model. And again the invocation of the party's ancestors / prominent figures makes quite an impression on the audience. Again, the use of a symbol constitutes a short-cut to a ready-made message while raising strong emotions

### **ECONOMY:**

Economy wise, John Penrose urges Sunak to adopt a Nigel Lawson economic plan to “unblock the arteries of our economy with low-cost, pro-competition supply-side reforms?”

*John Penrose: 01/02/2023 vol 727col 340 Q10. Two years ago, the Prime Minister commissioned me to propose 30 ways to boost growth and make Britain the most competitive country in the world. So far, we are under way with about half of them, but some of the most valuable, such as reforming ponderous and expensive utilities regulators or building on our international lead in open banking, have not moved at all. **Will he meet me to discuss how to channel our inner Nigel Lawsons and unblock the arteries of our economy with low-cost, pro-competition supply-side reforms?***

→Philip Davies is blunt in his demands for Sunak to be more conservative and for less state interference in people's lives.

14/06/2023 vol. 734, col 297. *Philip Davies: One of the **socialist landmines** that the Prime Minister has inherited from the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip is the banning of **“buy one, get one free”** and other special offers on products that the Department of Health and Social Care thought were unhealthy. At the best of times that is an **idiotic triumph of the nanny state**, but during a cost of living crisis it is utterly bonkers. **Will the Prime Minister intervene, pursue a more Conservative agenda, and scrap this ridiculous policy?***

The mention of Nigel Lawson (Thatcher's longest-serving Chnacellor of the Exchequer 1983-1989) and M. Thatcher is a way of giving full force to their demands.

The strength of their speech is derived from the strength of the symbols.  
It is also a way to urge the PM to take a more conservative approach to the economy  
→ tax cuts +deregulation of the City of London + fight against inflation

→ in favour of a limited state – in terms of public spending but also in terms of interfering with individuals' lives making decision for their own good.

### Conclusion **SUNAK is not conservative enough**

These members of the party want to go back to more eco liberalism (in the classical sense of the notion) in the Thatcherite and Majorite sense

-> solution: Smaller state and ending "Nanny state" supporting /, 'aɪzəɪə/ Isaiah Berlin's concept of "negative freedom" (being free from) → promoting the absence of interference in a person's sphere of action. No external bodies interfering with my actions through some bans or some regulations => ex: state and the supra institutions (like the ECHR, European Court of Justice...)

A smaller state is a means of achieving **positive freedom**.  
(freedom to do) : nanny state stultifying effort and opportunities = The state shouldn't be the only provider of the material means of people's freedom (benefits or Keynesian-style economics) but it should also loosen its grip to let people get their own means to access their own freedom. Shouldn't be vertical from State to civil society but freedom should come from the society / community itself (ref to previous presentation here)

However, in other areas the role of the state remains significant = fight against crime and illegal immigration

Another example of the need to curb / limit state's control for the sake of people's freedom is illustrated by Miriam Cates who expresses concerns that the gvt's re-**definition of extremism** could have adverse effects on freedom of speech

👉 13/03/2024, vol. 747, col. 295: Miriam Cates (con): Q8. Radical Islamists pose a serious threat to our nation's security. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that we must urgently address that, but reports that the Government wish to **broaden the definition of extremism** are concerning, because in separating the definition of extremism from actual violence and harm, **we may criminalise people with a wide range of legitimate views** and have a chilling effect on **free speech**. Will my right hon. Friend reassure me that, instead of trying to police people's thoughts and speech—as Opposition Members clearly wish to do—the Government will target specific groups that foster terrorism and those who fund them?

--> ironically, she fears that the wide range of legitimate views she alludes to, for example, the populist radical right views (Tim Bale extremism) might be censored. More state intervention to fight against crime is acceptable but not when it goes against one's own interests.

To sum up, all in all, the three main topics/ issues MPs are the most vocal about are: **immigration, Britain's sovereignty** in the face of Europe's threats, and **the economy**. They want him/Sunak to be more committed to these issues.

### **A Factional conservatism = Who are those MPs ?**

Observations : Those who have been the most vocal about their views have been the more radical members of the Conservative party. No attacks or attempts at drawing people's attention on a specific point have been made by the more moderate groups of the party : i.e, The One Nation group for exemple (who is one of the largest group in the party). (Theresa May was supported by soft brexiteres when she was attacked by the hard liners in her own party)

All MPs previously mentioned belong to one of these radical group within the party.

**ERG** (Andrea Jenkyns, John Penrose) ,

**Common Sense gp** (Philip Davies, Andrew Rosindell) ,

**New Conservatives** (Miriam Cates), Natcon (Miriam Cates, Suella Braverman, Kemi Badenoch, Priti Patel, Robert Jenrick...),

**Pop Con...**

In May 2021, the common sense grp (around 40 socially conservative Tory MPs), published an anti-"woke" pamphlet that called on the prime minister to "promote British values, traditions and history".

Using PMQs to publicly urging the PM to move to the right is the strategy adopted by these groups to move the party towards their own ideology.

What ideology are we talking about?

=> National conservatism + social conservatism + Euroscepticism → What it means to be a Conservative for them

This study of Conservatism within the frame of PMQs shows that Conservatism is not the doing of PM only but **is more a factional conservatism**

### **Conclusion :**

Sunak used the same rhetorical strategies as his predecessors often walking on tight rope to avoid alienating the most influential groups within the party. What is certainly the more specific feature of his premiership during PMQs is his anti-woke rhetoric. Tim Bale = temptation for cons politicians to pursue their "war on woke" against lefty lawyers, universities, the civil service blob, the BBC, the Remoaner elite is overwhelming (p. 289)

No additional layers but rather the re-ignition/ highlighting of issues + more prominent at times but nothing really new.

But a new bogeyman halting the progress of Conservative thought and politics has been identified by the Popular Conservatives: 'leftism', 'wokery', and the 'blob'— which includes not just the Civil Service but domestic and international institutions like universities, the Supreme Court, the ECHR, COP, the Bank of England, and, of course, quangos.

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