

Sunak's campaign has become painful to watch

Prime minister has been on the golden travelator from Winchester to No 10 but winning over the country is different

by Janice Turner, Friday 21st June 2024, The Times

A friend who interviewed Rishi Sunak recently says that afterwards he felt a strong impulse to give him a hug. It's unusual for a political hack to pity a prime minister but from the start of this campaign Sunak has grown daily more excruciating to watch.

It's the way he sits attentively on his chair's edge, the diminutive frame in dinky tailoring, that public schoolboy lisp. It's the eyes that flick between exhaustion, irritation and despair. He's the baffled *The Apprentice* project manager who lost after giving 110%, the head boy bollocked for some sixth-form debauch he didn't even attend. Sunak knows he's screwed — he can't quite fathom why.

A quarter of the electorate has a lower opinion of him since the election was called, according to polling this week by The Times. Much of it can be traced back to his leaving the D-Day commemorations early: the disrespect for veterans, the needy scurrying back for a paltry ITV pre-record, his incomprehension that, amid a bitter European war, that a photocall with allied leaders was the diplomatic front line.

But D-Day wasn't a diary glitch, a political miscalculation on poor advice from his team. It revealed something deeper about Sunak, which makes him fundamentally ill-suited to standing as PM. All his experience has led him to believe that if he just stays long enough at his desk, sweats every spreadsheet, he can succeed. But a country is not a bank or a global corporation. It is a living organism: it has a heart.

Sunak is too far removed to feel its pulse. His parents thought the elite education they struggled to afford would grant their son all life's advantages. And it did, in the main. It put him on the golden travelator from Winchester to Oxford to Goldman Sachs to Stanford, and a hedge fund which made him a multimillionaire by 25, bagging him a billionaire's daughter for a wife. But this purchased privilege put him too early, too young, above the clouds in the cool, conditioned air of the uber-rich. A slick mind, hard work, charm and looking the part are all that's required here, and such things will take you a long way in the Conservative Party too, an almost frictionless entry into Downing Street in fact.

But winning over the country is different. It is dirty and visceral, requiring qualities you can't learn or home and certainly not buy. The electorate is a savvy beast. It does the numbers, is rarely fooled. (It knew Corbyn's magic 2019 manifesto was too good to be true.) But it chooses a leader with its primal brain too — and infallibly roots out the phoney.

When Sunak was asked what he went without growing up, the answer should have been clear: "Luckily, I wanted for nothing — and that is the life I wish for every British child." But Sunak, the try-hard, thought if the test was to be disadvantaged, he had to score an A. His mind flailed: "Plenty of things!" he cried, before alighting comically on not having Sky TV.

How can a man who is richer than the king — yet without a monarch's lifelong duty to intuit the people — show he is "normal"? It is not just that Sunak's everyday objects are so expensive — the £180 mug, the £3,500 suit, the indoor swimming pool; when he tries the common touch it feels workshopped and contrived. His election diet, he says, is Haribos and Twix. Fasting, teetotal, one-Coke-a-week Rishi? Who believes that?

His wife, Akshata Murty, thinks walking her own dog or shopping in Tesco makes her family just like ours. It is the extraordinary differences that never seem to cross their minds: her non-dom status, his US Green Card, a freedom – even if they don’t take it – to flee Britain post-election to their Santa Monica redoubt and a whole new life. Like only a handful of the global elite – Musk, Gates and Bezos – the Sunaks are true citizens of anywhere.

Meanwhile on Earth, Rishi tackles the mystery of ordinary humans. It is the small details that reveal him. At the *Question Time* grilling he was asked how he’d make young people comply with national service. Sunak muttered about their driving licences and “access to finance”. So a generation that faces student debt, stagnant wages and sky-high rents might lose their Monzo cards too if they won’t dig gardens or join the St John’s ambulance unpaid. Can he hear how he sounds?

This was tetchy, take-me-or-leave-me Rishi, too tired now to make nice, who is counting the days before he can throw down that parcel of Tory sleaze and smashed promises he was left holding when the music stopped. You hear his indignation at being blamed for Johnson’s parties and Truss’s economic head-fit. Not my fault, he wants to cry, I was up in the Treasury doing hard sums.

But here he is, exposed as someone who believes in nothing, who capriciously called an election so the two policies he purports to care about – Rwanda and the smoking ban – will never happen. Well nothing, that is, except believing he’d be good at this PM lark. And now that appears so abundantly untrue.

The privileged world he has lived in for decades is like a Faraday bag that blocks out normal human signals. Why else would he not sack on the spot every grubby shyster, including his own campaign manager, who thinks democracy itself is worth a shifty bet? Unable to feel voters’ rage, Sunak prevaricates; this man who was a partner in the hedge fund that pushed the sale of ABN Amro to RBS in 2007 and bet against British banks in the subsequent financial crash.

Poor Rishi, being beasted on LBC phone-ins, blamed for 14 years of impunity, fielding a whole nation’s pent-up rage. Just two more weeks playing this man-of-the-people game, the only one until now you’ve never won.