

The crisis of acceptability for UK democracy might now ...

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Yesterday was the most extraordinary day in parliament.

Around 60 Tory MPs demanded that their own government deport people seeking asylum and a place of refuge in the UK to Rwanda even though the UK Supreme Court, having considered the evidence put before it, had ruled that the country in question was not a safe place for these people. These MPs were, however, clear in their opinion: saving their seats was more important than the lives of refugees arriving in the UK.

Then, in the evening, we saw 56 Labour MPs vote against the instruction of their party because they, wholly reasonably and ethically, wished to vote for a ceasefire in the conflict in Gaza, which their own party opposed because to agree to such a demand would have required that Labour recognise the existence of the SNP and the democratic will of the people of Scotland that made that party the third largest group in parliament. The Labour leadership was clear: it would happily tolerate the deaths of innocent people, children, and babies rather than recognise that the SNP could be right on any issue.

Political depravity rarely reaches these depths. Yesterday it did on both the government and official opposition benches. Leading aside the issues in question, on which my positions are quite clear, this worries me.

Within democracies, politics operates on the basis of consent. In other words, people accept rule by a government because they believe that the rule in question is at least benign and very commonly beneficial. When, however, it becomes apparent that this is not true, and I would now suggest that this is glaringly obviously the case, then we face a crisis. The assumption that democratic government is to be tolerated in that circumstance cannot be taken for granted. There is, instead, a very real chance that people will reject the idea of government by either of these parties, thinking both unacceptable to them.

If that happens, then there are three possible reactions.

One is that at least one of these parties might see sense and get rid of the toxic situation that they have created, and seek to restore trust. I can see no way that this could happen amongst the Tories at present, even if they chose their fourth leader during the course of this Parliament. It is, however, just possible that Labour could achieve this outcome by getting rid of Starmer. Who his replacement as leader might be is hard to suggest. Ed Miliband might be the obvious choice, but he has his past record to deal with. Angela Rayner is another obvious option, and there is no one who believes that she has very much faith in Starmer. Whether, however, she would want to deliver electoral reform is open to serious doubt. I fear she is tribal. Few of the other remaining members of the shadow cabinet look to have any real credibility. All have followed the Starmer line far too closely.

The second possible reaction is that people demand electoral reform, a proper constitution, and the right for nations to leave the union if that is their wish. The reaction to this moment of crisis would, in other words, be to recognise the political realities that now exist within the supposed UK and address them by providing people with the real choices that they need so that confidence in the political process can be restored. This is, quite obviously, the desirable course of action.

The third option is that we end up with fascism, which is the path on which the Tories are headed and to which Labour at present provides no effective opposition.

I thought this crisis was some years ahead as yet. I am no longer sure. The moral bankruptcy and vacuum of political leadership that was in evidence in our two leading critical parties yesterday suggests that a crisis for UK democracy is much closer than I thought, and we should never forget the fascists are ready and waiting.