

Sunak: mean, cruel, punitive and profoundly unjust

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The Sunday Telegraph has this lead article this morning (and I apologise for testing your eyesight):

Sunak: I'll cut tax by curbing welfare

Help for taxpayers in spring to be followed by additional pledges in run-up to election

By Edward Malnick
SUNDAY POLITICAL EDITOR

RISHI SUNAK has pledged to curb benefits and government spending to fund tax cuts before and after a general election.

In an interview with *The Sunday Telegraph*, the Prime Minister made his most explicit commitment yet to further tax cuts before an election, saying: "When I say that I want to keep cutting taxes, that's what we're going to deliver."

He added that there would be further tax cuts as part of the Tory party offering during the election campaign. "I'm going to be crystal clear. My priority is cutting taxes," he said.

Mr Sunak sought to draw a dividing line with Labour by funding tax cuts by bearing down on Britain's welfare bill and overall government spending, with measures such as the hiring freeze on civil servants.

Tax is becoming the primary battleground between the Conservatives and Labour and Mr Sunak said he wanted to focus on levies "on work" in the same vein as the 2p National Insurance cut that took effect on Saturday.

His intervention hints at a looming income tax cut at the March 6 Budget, to be implemented before an election and potentially partly funded by further welfare reforms in addition to the £4 billion in savings from changes announced in September.

His comments suggest that the Tories' election manifesto will commit to further tax cuts.

Going further than Jeremy Hunt, who yesterday would not guarantee tax cuts, Mr Sunak told *The Sunday Telegraph*: "The Autumn Statement delivered the biggest set of tax cuts in one event since the 1980s.

"That should give people a sense of the scale of what we've just done, and a sense of my ambition and the Chancellor's determination to cut taxes. When I

say that I want to keep cutting taxes, that's what we're going to deliver.

"We're going to do that responsibly. That requires difficult decisions on public spending. It requires difficult decisions to control welfare. Those I believe are the right things to do for our country. That's what I want to do.

"I'm very clear, I want to control public spending, I want to control welfare, which we're doing and because we're doing that, and because we're being disciplined with borrowing and our debt, we're going to be in a position to cut taxes."

Asked about which taxes he would target, Mr Sunak added: "I believe in the nobility of work, I believe work is central to people's lives. And I believe that in a society where people are working hard should be one where their hard work is rewarded. And that's why I'm really pleased that we cut tax significantly on National Insurance, because it's a tax on work."

Turning to the election, Mr Sunak added: "That will be a contrast between us and the Labour Party at the next election. Lots of people will say to us, oh, gosh, you're not going to spend enough here, there and everywhere. I'm going to be crystal clear. My priority is cutting taxes, not more government spending ... So that's the plan. The only way to cut your taxes over time is to have a smaller, more efficient public sector."

Mr Hunt, the Chancellor, is being urged ahead of the Budget by more than 45 Conservative MPs to ensure that "deeply worrying" forecasting errors by the Office for Budget Responsibility are not hampering Britain's economic recovery.

This weekend, the Chancellor appeared to confirm that an inheritance tax cut was under consideration, describing the levy as "a pernicious tax".

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The message from Sunak is unambiguous. After fourteen years in which the Tories have made the social security system mean, cruel, punitive and profoundly unjust, as well as under-claimed, they want to make things worse for those in need.

Some might have noticed that I have some concerns about Labour at present, but they are not, I admit, as cruel, discriminatory and profoundly unjust as the Tories. It is a low bar, but I will note it. I am not a fan of Rachel Reeves' approach to social security, but it is not as bad as this.

Perhaps, more importantly, the question this leads to is important. What did happen to Beveridge's vision of a welfare state? Why is it that we have turned against those in need? Is this simply that the egocentricity and utter selfishness of neoliberal ideology has won? Or have our politicians lost any sense of empathy that might drive their moral compass?

What is certain is that the Tories no longer believe in One Nation.