

UK Clown Car

by GWYNNE DYER

Italy is getting nervous. The United Kingdom's Conservative Party (aka the Tories) has now been led by four different Prime Ministers in only six years. Italy still holds the long-term record ? a new government every thirteen months since 1945? but Britain is now nipping at its heels.

Even more impressively, the UK has gone through four Chancellors of the Exchequer (finance ministers) in the past four months. Britain, and particularly the Conservative Party, now resembles a circus clown car whose tightly packed riders keep tumbling out, falling over, quarrelling, setting off pointless fireworks, climbing back in, and doing it all over again.

The latest Tory prime minister, Liz Truss, is likely to be overthrown by her party's own rebellious Members of Parliament by the end of this month. Her first ?mini-budget?, unveiled only last month, delighted her radical-right faction of the Tories, but its recklessness about huge unfunded borrowing horrified the markets and the banks.

She momentarily staved off a further collapse of the British pound and even higher interest rates by bringing in a new Chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, over the weekend. He will effectively have the power to force her back to fiscal orthodoxy (by threatening to resign), so maybe the ship of state can be righted again. But it is probably too little, too late for her.

By Monday morning, almost all of Truss's announced changes of tax cuts had been cancelled by her new Chancellor and de facto boss, Jeremy Hunt, and the markets appeared to be calming down. However, they will not regard the UK as a safe place to put money for years to come, and Truss has become ?pointless?, as a former Tory cabinet minister put it.

But what can the Tories do about it? They would be annihilated politically if they held an election now. Moreover, the party's own internal rule currently bans them from changing the party leader (and thus the prime minister too) until a year has passed since the previous one walked the plank.

The show certainly gives some innocent amusement to those who like watching once powerful and dignified entities performing serial pratfalls. Beyond the all shouting and the schadenfreude, however, there is a curious political phenomenon unfolding here: a once-serious political party has gone gaga.

Everything that has happened politically in the United Kingdom since 2016, starting with the self-mutilation of Brexit and ending (or perhaps not yet ending) with Liz Truss's lunatic Tory version of Mao's ?Great Leap Forward?, is driven by an unarticulated belief that the country is in terminal decline, and that only radical and risky methods can reverse that.

I owe this observation to Patrick Cockburn, one of the most perceptive British journalists working today. He offers Russia as another example of the same phenomenon.

There are differences between these examples, of course. Russia's great gamble to reverse its geopolitical and strategic decline is expressed as military aggression. That's a typical initial response to a perceived fall in power due to the loss of an empire.

The United Kingdom is considerably ahead of Russia on that curve, having got most of its militaristic impulses out of its system with failed military campaigns against Egypt and in a few former colonies in the 1950s and 60s.

What's happening in Britain nowadays is an equally desperate but less violent attempt to reverse a long period of relative economic decline, from second-largest economy in the world in 1950 to sixth today (after India).

The more simple-minded nationalists see that as national failure. Brexit was the first radical but foolish attempt to turn the perceived

decline around. Truss's low-tax, high-debt nostrums were another.

This sort of nonsense probably won't go on forever, because the economic 'decline' is just relative. Britain has lost ground to some 'developing' countries that are in the high-growth phase of their economic journey, and it has made some major domestic mistakes, but it's still a rich country 'far richer than it was fifty years ago.

This is a phenomenon that only strikes countries with an inflated view of their own importance, generally because they were once great powers or at least owned extensive colonial empires. Britain has a particularly bad case of it, but this too shall pass.

In the meantime, bring on the clowns!