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The west: Enormous changes at the last minute

by GWYNNE DYER

By Friday (5 July), we will know the outcome of the British election. On Monday (8 July) we will know the result of the French election. And by the middle of the month it will be clear whether Joe Biden remains the Democratic presidential candidate in the United States. If he does, then Donald Trump will probably win the election in November.

Very little of this was planned. The British election was expected this year, but in October or November ? until Prime Minister Rishi Sunak surprised everybody (including his own Conservative Party) by calling it early. It was a gamble that failed.

No national election was expected in France until 2027, but President Emmanuel Macron called the National Assembly (parliament) elections three years early after his party took a severe beating in the European elections early last month. Another dramatic gamble that has failed.

And the Democratic Party seemed certain to choose Joe Biden as its candidate for the presidency again despite some muttered misgivings in the party about his age (81). That certainty imploded after Biden's poor performance in the first TV debate with Donald Trump last week, and there is now a panicky debate within the party about replacing him.

Technically it's not too late for the Democrats to change horses ? their nominating convention is in late August ? but in practical terms it cannot be done at this late stage without Biden's full and willing cooperation.

We'll know within the next two or three weeks if there's any hope of easing Biden out without triggering a war within the Democratic Party. If an exit deal is not visible by then, we can conclude that Biden will go ahead and fight ? and probably lose the November election. His mind may still be sharp most of the time, but perceptions matter more.

So there we suddenly are, with three of the four biggest Western countries, containing about half of NATO's population, facing elections that may radically change their political orientations. In the American and French cases, their next governments may be hard right, with fascist undertones.

The United Kingdom's election is the soonest and the least alarming, so let's start there. The Tories (Conservatives) have been in power for fourteen years by now, so time would have eroded their popularity even if they had wonderful and successful policies. Their policies were neither of those things.

They left the European Union (Brexit) and lost free access to Britain's largest market by far. They imposed savage and needless austerity measures simply to serve their ideological goal of shrinking the state. British family incomes at the end of their fourteen years in power, astoundingly, are actually lower than they were at the start.

Things went crazy in the last five of those years, during which the country had four different Tory prime ministers but only one election. Once Brexit was done the party ran out of ideas, so the Conservative members of parliament broke up into vaguely ideological gangs and started fighting each other.

One prime minister was forced to resign for serial lying (Boris Johnson), another for crashing the economy (Liz Truss). The British economy rotted, the National Health Service is near collapse, and Prime Minister Sunak's final obsession was to ?get the flights going? to export asylum-seekers from Britain to Rwanda. (Cost: more than $1 million per person.)

That will never happen now, and the only question for the Conservatives is whether this election will be merely a catastrophe (two terms in opposition and then maybe a come-back), or a full-scale extinction event from which there is no return.

The Conservatives have been in office for more than half the time since the ?modern' party was founded 190 years ago, but apart from Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists in the years before the Second World War they have never before had to face a challenge from the right.

Nigel Farage's Reform UK Party is nationalist, populist and dog-whistle racist, but it is a far more sophisticated operation than Mosley's ridiculous blackshirts. Farage's goal is to supplant the traditional Conservative Party as the natural home for right-wing Britons, but he is not averse to achieving that goal by a hostile take-over of the Tories.

There are prominent figures in the Conservative Party, fearing near-annihilation in this week's election, who see this as their only plausible route back to power within the next decade. The populist wave that threatens to engulf the West is a long-term threat in Britain, too ? but for the next five years, at least, the Labour Party will govern with a massive majority.

It will take longer than that to repair all the economic and social damage that has been done, but at least it's a start. Elsewhere, the picture is darker.