The state is not the sovereign: Factions, frameworks and the fragility of authority

By Marcus Coetzee, November 2026.

Most people in the UK think about politics in terms of left versus right, Labour versus Conservative, progressive versus traditional. This approach explains a great deal. But it is less useful in an environment where factions control the political conversation and the equilibrium in a country. The seed for this essay was my attempts to try and explain South African politics to friends and colleagues in the UK, across several conversations, and with many text messages exchanged in the process.

I grew up in Cape Town and watched South Africa change over several decades before moving to the UK in 2021. The mental model I carry from those years turns out to be very useful. It allows me to see how factions operate, these being the competing organisations that vie for power, resources, and influence in any society, each looking after its own interests above all else. This is especially relevant since factions are showing signs of coalescing across the UK, a trend that must be treated with caution, as we don't want them hardening into the types of factions active in South Africa.

In this essay I want to do five things. First, to show you what a fully factionised society looks like, using South Africa as the case study. Second, to draw out the principles that govern how factions behave based upon my observations. Third, to ask who is actually sovereign in a modern liberal democracy like the UK. My answer is that frameworks of law, rights and treaties now sit where God once sat in the medieval order, above government and, in practice, above Parliament. This creates a paradox: frameworks designed to protect citizens from the state may weaken the state to the point where it can no longer protect them (and itself) from factions. Fourth, to consider how factions are visible, in milder form, in the UK. And fifth, to argue that a state's ability to keep its factions in check depends on three foundations that must be actively maintained, and which seem to be slipping in the UK.

I have no formal background in political science. I arrived at these observations by simply noticing things around me. I am sure political scientists would have fun placing this essay within their theories, and I certainly enjoyed writing it.

1. Key factions in South Africa

Here are some examples of factions at the top of my mind, that wield power and influence and contribute to the status quo. Note that I'm talking about political power more broadly than the election of parties at local and national elections. I've grouped the factions for ease of understanding.

1.1. The captured state

1. Police - The South African Police Service has around 155,000 sworn officers but is widely regarded as compromised by corruption, infiltrated by organised crime, and unequally distributed, leaving large areas effectively unpoliced. Most people would never think of calling the police in an emergency - that's what family and neighbours are there for, and the role of private security for the rich.

2. Government departments - Around 2.75 million people work for the state and its state-owned entities, roughly one in six of everyone employed, and state capture under President Zuma redirected entire departments to serve factional patronage networks (as opposed to neutral bureaucracies), with around R57 billion (about £2.5 billion) of state contracts tainted by Gupta-linked state capture, according to the Zondo Commission.

3. Military - The South African National Defence Force has around 70,000 active personnel but is significantly under-resourced and degraded from its apartheid-era capability, though it retains institutional loyalty and has been deployed in internal security roles.

1.2. Parallel authorities

4. Traditional tribal leaders and identities - Thousands of traditional leaders govern communal land and customary law for an estimated 17 million people, operating parallel to the elected local government with their own courts, levies, and loyalties. Yet the state pays them salaries, with recognised kings earning over R1.4 million (about £63,000) a year, and provinces fund their royal households, effectively buying the cooperation of a feudal authority outside of its chain of command.

5. Minibus taxi associations - The taxi industry moves an estimated 15 million passengers daily and is controlled by regional associations that have historically used violence, including arson and assassination, to acquire and defend routes, and resist regulation.

6. Private security - South Africa has over 2.8 million registered private security officers, of whom around 577,000 are actively employed, more than the police and army combined. This creates a two-tier protection system where safety is a purchased service rather than a right guaranteed by the state. Even my local police station in Cape Town installed a panic button for private armed-response security after the station was robbed and the police locked in the cells.

7. Businesses - Large corporations, particularly in mining, retail, and financial services, wield significant political influence through direct lobbying, BEE compliance negotiations, and their capacity to relocate capital. They also fill critical gaps left by state failure, which includes building roads, clinics, schools and economic infrastructure in areas that the government has never reached, making them both a competing faction and an inadvertent substitute sovereign in many communities.

1.3. Armed and criminal networks

8. Organised crime - South Africa has become a significant hub for transnational organised crime, with syndicates controlling activities such as drug trafficking, abalone poaching, copper theft, illegal mining, and large-scale fraud, with crime as a whole costing the country at least 10% of its GDP each year according to the World Bank. To put this into perspective, South Africa's murder rate is around 70% higher than Mexico's.

9. Gangs, both local and foreign - Long-standing estimates suggest the Cape Flats in Cape Town alone has around 130 gangs with up to 100,000 members, while foreign gangs (particularly Nigerian, Eastern European and Chinese networks according to the 2025 Africa Organised Crime Index) operate nationally across drug, human trafficking, racketeering and counterfeit goods markets.

10. "Disbanded" paramilitary and intelligence units - Former apartheid-era security structures, ANC armed wing MK, PAC's APLA and the ANC's exile intelligence department were nominally integrated or demobilised, but many retained networks, weapons and the capacity for organised violence. Furthermore, a 2018 presidential review found the State Security Agency had been repurposed for factional ANC battles.

1.4. Influence and interest

11. Political parties and their community structures - The ANC alone has hundreds of thousands of members in good standing and operates through branch structures that influence access to housing, jobs, contracts and even food parcels at community level, making party membership a survival strategy for many.

12. Trade unions - Around 3 million people are members of trade unions, a significant voting bloc with the power to mobilise millions in pursuit of purely sectoral interests, though their power is diminishing due to declining employment and disagreements within COSATU, an umbrella body for trade unions.

13. Oligarchs - A small number of extraordinarily wealthy individuals (seven dollar billionaires on Forbes' 2026 list, and others just below), from both established white dynasties and post-apartheid black billionaires, wield disproportionate influence through capital allocation, media ownership, and direct political access. Unlike Russia, where Putin subordinated the oligarchs to the state at considerable cost to democracy, the South African state has never been strong enough to bring its oligarchs to heel, so they remain an influential faction.

14. Media - South Africa’s fractured media landscape, spanning ANC-aligned titles under politically connected ownership, a captured state broadcaster, and an independent investigative press which is a thorn in the government's side, fights to control public narrative. The big international platforms and their algorithms are also part of this fragmented faction.

15. Migrant communities - Over a million Zimbabweans (according to the 2022 census, with unofficial estimates considerably higher) and large communities from Mozambique,

Nigeria, Somalia and China live largely outside formal political structures. Facing periodic xenophobic violence that the state has repeatedly failed to prevent, and barriers to engage with the formal economy and state structures, many rely on their own trading associations, informal credit networks and mutual protection, turning to their community for the security the state does not provide.

There are factions other than the ones I've listed above, as well as factions within each of these factions. Nothing is simple in factional conflict.

2. Principles of how factions operate, especially in South Africa

A faction is an organised group that puts its own interests above the shared rules of the society it operates in, or that contests the state's right to set those rules.

A faction is different from an ordinary interest group, such as a charity, church or residents' association, which competes for influence within the rules and accepts the state's authority to make them. Edmund Burke's "little platoons", often taken to mean family, church and local associations, are the healthy version. Burke called attachment to the little platoon "the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind." Factions are what happens when such groups stop deferring to the whole and start carving out their own territory. The line is not always clean, and groups can move across it.

Every organisation with purpose, and the resources, capacity and inclination to apply leverage, has the potential to become a faction.

Factions have their own worldviews and values, moral frameworks and sense of vice and virtue - this applies even to rough street and prison gangs. There is currently no overall shared moral framework in our relativistic world, a unifying system of right and wrong, vice and virtue, that all factions share and aspire to, and which unify the rules of engagement.

Factions are all aware of who is inside and outside the faction, as well as which factions are currently allies or enemies, neutral or on the sidelines. Alliances may change over time, as is the nature of politics.

Every faction vies for resources, influence and power. Many factions in South Africa are prepared to use leverage, bribery, coercion, fraud, extortion, racketeering, and force if necessary, to achieve their ends. This might be done discreetly or overtly depending on the faction, or even through an ally if necessary. For example, Charl Kinnear, a Section Commander in Cape Town's Anti-Gang Unit, was shot dead outside his home in 2020. The alleged underworld figure accused of ordering the hit claims that police officers were behind it, and senior officers were found to have failed him, having withdrawn the protection he was given after an earlier attempt on his life. Whether or not a faction within the state arranged his death, the state did not protect one of its own.

Here's another example. Taxi operators have engaged in arson and gun-violence against bus services, trains and other taxis to secure profitable routes in the city. Yet in July 2021,

during the mass looting and attempts to destabilise the country that followed Jacob Zuma's imprisonment, taxi operators organised to defend their local shopping malls, because they could see how the destruction would impact their future earnings. In the Eastern Cape, one taxi association bought 270 sjamboks (rubber whips) for members guarding shops from looters, and the Gauteng government formally commended the taxi industry for its stance. This helps show that the state does not have a monopoly on violence, and factions will use it or withhold it entirely according to their own interests.

When resources become scarce, then the fault lines between the factions gain tectonic friction and heat up, as the factions rub together and eventually conflict over power and resources. The resources might be budgets, contracts, jobs, buildings, national policy, even mundane things like appointments or food, and elusive things like culture and identity. The factions work to secure these resources for themselves and their members.

Factions tend to establish networks of patronage, much like the feudal system, where members are loyal to the faction and receive benefits due to their position in the hierarchy. This tendency is still common within countries that have relatively recently established Western-type civil services, and such patronage would have been considered entirely normal in many times and places throughout history.

The government in South Africa lacks the strength and credibility to provide an overarching strategy and system of governance for the country. It tries but often struggles or fails, somewhat because so much of its own agenda and operations has been corrupted, "captured", and hijacked by factions, and sometimes simply because it lacks the necessary leverage to ensure that everyone is aligned. This realisation was one of the reasons why I emigrated since it did not bode well for the future.

The status quo in South Africa is the present equilibrium between the abilities of the factions to apply leverage to achieve their objectives. This status quo is therefore constantly shifting as power and leverage shifts.

These factions tend to create a horizontal system of power distribution. Factions compete horizontally for advantage with other factions or sub factions, as opposed to being vertically accountable or deferential to a superordinate structure or sovereign authority like strong credible government, king, dictator, or even church as was the case for much of the Middle Ages. Factions also tend to be accountable inward to their own hierarchies before a superordinate state.

South Africans all have an intuitive sense of the dynamics between these factions and how to navigate them in their everyday lives. It is simply how things are. Presumably it's the same for much of Africa and other developing countries.

These factions illustrate what Thomas Hobbes, an English political philosopher writing in the 17th century, warned against. He saw factions as private systems or organised groups within a commonwealth that assert their own competing structures of interpretation, loyalty and command, breaking down the unified power of the superordinate sovereign.

Hobbes believed that the moment factions start disregarding the authority of the sovereign, everything begins sliding back toward the state of nature, which tends to get ugly. The sovereign's authority depends entirely on the perception that it can and will enforce order. Once that perception weakens, and once factions calculate they can defy the sovereign and suffer no consequences, the authority dissolves rapidly because everyone is watching everyone else. If one faction defies the sovereign and gets away with it, others re-calibrate their approach. The logic cascades. This is exactly what is happening in South Africa - there are only competing powers, of which one is the government.

Hobbes believed that the only way out of this predicament is a new social contract. People become so exhausted and terrified by the violence and insecurity of life without order that they voluntarily surrender their autonomy to a new sovereign powerful enough to impose peace. Hobbes did not foresee fascism, but his logic helps explain how a fascist dictator may come to power and be embraced - not through a legitimate state consolidating its power, but rather through a faction promising order in the chaos. The Weimar Republic is a good example of this.

3. Who is sovereign in the UK?

In the Middle Ages, the architecture of authority was clear. Everyone was accountable to the king and the church, who were meant to counterbalance each other, and who were both theoretically accountable to God. This clear vertical relationship gave the system coherence, even though it was imperfect and unchallengeable.

In the modern UK, I believe that frameworks have replaced God as the ultimate sovereign. Frameworks include constitutional law, human rights legislation, international treaties, judicial precedent, and fiscal rules. These sit above the government, even above Parliament in practice, in the same type of position God once occupied, and treated as unchallengeable in the same way.

To be precise, Parliament retains the legal power to repeal any of these frameworks, and in theory remains sovereign. But as I explored in my essay on frameworks, the political, diplomatic and legal costs of doing so are so high that in practice no government attempts it. This is why political and government leaders seem unable to change the trajectory of the country. A sovereign that cannot exercise its power without unbearable cost is sovereign in name only.

And the people who interpret these frameworks, such as judges, lawyers, human rights bodies and international courts, occupy the position of medieval clergy, deriving enormous authority from claimed expertise in the sacred texts. Frameworks are, in this sense, a secular god determining what is acceptable and what is virtuous, and setting the rules of engagement for everyone and all the factions below.

Frameworks are the sovereign. Factions are accountable to the UK state which in turn is accountable to frameworks. This vertical relationship is different from the South African situation where there is no clear sovereign, and where factions compete horizontally to achieve an equilibrium based on their balance of power and influence.

But there seems to be a profound problem with the arrangement present in the UK. Frameworks were designed to constrain state overreach, to protect individuals and minorities from an overbearing and oppressive government. They are like train tracks that limit the strategic decisions and directions that government officials and political leaders can take. They were designed to prevent leaders, both appointed and elected, from making poor or reckless decisions.

But another unintended consequence of these frameworks is emerging. These frameworks weaken the UK government's capacity to act decisively in the moments when decisive action is most needed - to both prevent the emergence of factions, and to fix what may happen when factions start grinding against each other and generating friction. When disorder emerges, when factions become bold, when the social contract frays, a state needs maximum flexibility and authority. But frameworks hem it in. The government cannot control its borders or run the economy or streamline its budget as it might judge necessary. Nor can it enforce certain laws without judicial challenge.

And when things genuinely collapse, or turbulence and conflict emerges across a country, then frameworks are useless. South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world, but this doesn't give the government the power it needs to steer the country in the right direction. Frameworks that weaken the sovereign in the name of protecting citizens from it may ultimately leave those same citizens with neither a functioning state nor the protection the frameworks promised. South Africa does not lack frameworks, but rather a state capable of enforcing them.

This points to the heart of the paradox. Frameworks hold authority, but they cannot enforce anything themselves. They have no police, no army, and no ability to raise taxes. Hobbes put it bluntly: "covenants, without the sword, are but words." The state holds the sword, but is no longer free to use it as it judges necessary. Authority sits in one place and the capacity to enforce in another. Factions grow in the gap between the two, because they quickly learn that the rules bind the state far more tightly than they bind the factions themselves.

To be clear, I am not arguing for a strongman, or for discarding the protections that frameworks offer. The Weimar Republic shows where that road leads. I am arguing for a state that is strong enough to enforce its laws, and still be bound by them. This requires leaders to be aware of the power and limitations of frameworks and of what happens when factions start to emerge.

4. Factions in the UK

There are many factions and fault lines in the UK, and I will not be exploring each of them in this essay. However, two fault lines stand out as being unusual compared to what I experienced in Africa: the generational divide and the influence of universities. Neither is a faction in the sense I have defined, but both are the kind of division from which factions can grow. I will briefly touch on these two, before turning to the factions that are starting to coalesce.

One of the more unusual fault lines emerging in the UK cuts across class, race and geography - it is the generational divide. Younger people increasingly argue that older generations have shaped policy in their own image, protecting pension entitlements, inflating property values, and resisting the planning reforms that would make housing affordable. Older people, in turn, worry that younger generations are disengaged from the economy, reluctant to enter traditional employment, and having fewer children. Each side has a case. But what is notable is that this is a division defined not by ideology or identity but by when people were born, and what this means for their economic prospects. It is a relatively new fault line.

Universities also deserve particular attention, not as a faction, but because their influence operates upstream of politics. They shape the formation and worldview of the professional class: the civil servants, lawyers, charity leaders, journalists and policy advisors who staff the institutions through which the state governs. There is significant ideological homogeneity within universities meaning that certain sets of values and beliefs flow quietly downstream into the institutions, while alternative and perceived heretical views are softened. This makes UK universities very influential through shaping how future leaders across all sectors think, and in forming the doctrine of the organisations they go on to manage and lead.

What concerns me more is that some groups are starting to coalesce into something closer to factions in the South African sense. The pattern seems to follow stages: a shared grievance, then a shared identity, then organisation, and finally a willingness to step outside the rules. Most groups stop well before the last stage, and peaceful protest is a healthy part of any democracy. But some have crossed the line, on both the right and the left. Self-appointed street patrols have emerged in several towns and cities, taking on a role that belongs to the police, who have in turn warned residents not to join them. On the other side, Palestine Action's campaign of direct action against defence sites led the government to proscribe it under terrorism law in 2025, a decision the Court of Appeal upheld in 2026. These are very different causes, but they follow the same logic: each group has concluded that its cause matters more than the shared rules, and each is testing how far the state will go to enforce them.

I also considered exploring the factions and fault lines that might emerge in times of serious unrest, since I find this very interesting, drawing on the work of Professor David Betz at King's College London, whose analysis of fault lines in British society is sobering. But that is ultimately a description of symptoms. The underlying condition is the one I described in the previous section: a state whose authority is hemmed in from above by frameworks, facing factions below that are steadily learning how much they can get away with.

5. Three factors that constrain the emergence of factions in the UK and other countries

The UK state should do everything it can to keep its factions in check, and to ensure that it remains the superordinate structure, otherwise this country will become very difficult to govern, as is the case in South Africa.

Below I introduce three key strategies that the UK government should focus on. I also reflect on the importance of maintaining a healthy balance between these strategies - if these strategies overbalance or falter, then a state needs to employ more overt control to maintain order and stability, which is not something we want to happen.

5.1. Maintain order and the legitimate monopoly on force and violence.

Factions emerge much more easily when a state can't hold on to its authority and ensure law and order, even if this is simply a perception. Incidents of social unrest, widespread petty theft such as shoplifting and phone snatching, and illegal activities like fly-tipping all signal that the state is losing power, especially when the consequences to these crimes are light or non-existent. Retailers installing barriers, absorbing theft as a cost of business, or simply closing stores in certain areas are signals that the state has quietly retreated from enforcement in those domains. At the same time, we see the state becoming much stronger on digital surveillance and controlling the online space, which suggests enforcement shifting to where it is easiest, rather than where it is most needed. Unfortunately, I have a good sense of where this all leads, and it's not to a good place. Factions read permissiveness as opportunity.

To be clear, I am a strong believer in preventing crime upstream and in the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders. I have worked with several charities in the criminal justice field that do good work. But there must still be predictable consequences, applied fairly across all segments of the population, for those who commit crimes. Similarly, the state must clearly be able to protect its borders (including its undersea infrastructure), maintain a credible military deterrent, and keep citizens safe, otherwise trust is lost there too.

Max Weber, a German sociologist, defined the state as the community that successfully claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory. When that monopoly begins to fragment, even at the margins, and through tolerated low-level disorder, it sends a signal that is disproportionate to the act itself. If the state's authority breaks down, factions emerge in proportion, becoming more forceful in pursuing their agendas, and people begin turning to the protection of their faction before the legitimate authority. This is how factions accumulate power.

5.2. Maintain and cultivate a strong sense of national identity, with the state as the superordinate structure.

This softer cultural approach, contrasting with the use of force, is what Archbishop Desmond Tutu and President Mandela attempted in the 1990s, uniting people around the single identity and vision of the "Rainbow Nation", and wanting people to feel South African above their identification with racial, ethnic, or religious identities. I remember how much traction it gained at the time. It was a powerful and persuasive proposition that I bought into. It was ultimately and sadly eroded by factions, and is now an outdated tag line used by some government departments to attempt to promote solidarity. But its temporary success demonstrated what is possible when a state invests seriously in this kind of cultural work.

I am not entering the quagmire of left versus right, or whether nationalism is good or bad. I am simply suggesting that people in the UK need to feel genuinely connected to one another within a shared overarching identity. This would need to be a civic national identity in the case of the UK with its multi-ethnic population, built on shared institutions, obligations and loyalties, and open to anyone who embraces them, rather than one based on ethnicity or descent. (A country with a diverse population needs to put in more effort to create a shared national identity than a country with a more homogeneous population.) People also need to believe that a capable and legitimate state is in charge, one to which all factions are vertically accountable. If someone chooses to integrate into the identity of Britain or Scotland, that means adopting certain cultural conventions and recognising the state as the legitimate superordinate authority. This applies equally to those born here. That is not an unreasonable expectation; it is the basic social contract that allows a country to function.

The Italian political philosopher Antonio Gramsci called this cultural dimension "hegemony": the idea that stable governance requires not just coercive power but genuine cultural consent, a shared sense that the existing order is natural and legitimate. (Note that he developed this concept in his Prison Notebooks, written while imprisoned by Mussolini's regime, as a communist trying to understand why the working class had not overthrown the ruling order.) When hegemony erodes, coercion alone cannot hold things together. The state finds itself spending more energy suppressing dissent and less time building the conditions for genuine loyalty. That is an exhausting and ultimately losing position.

5.3. Look after the interests of citizens, and be seen to be doing so

The state must serve and be accountable to people, and there are contexts in which people must be accountable to the state. For example, I must follow certain laws and pay my taxes, or face unpleasant consequences. But the relationship is reciprocal, and when it breaks down in one direction, it weakens in the other.

In the UK, there is a growing sense that politics has enriched a certain class of elites at the expense of others. This sentiment appears across conversations about housing, education, employment, and cost of living. There is also a view that certain demographics have been neglected for political reasons, with the precise details depending on which faction one asks.

There is also a widening gap between the vision politicians implement and the promises that got them elected. All of this corrodes the legitimacy of the state. If the state cannot provide for me and you, then perhaps a faction can, or at least a faction might apply sufficient leverage on the state, and to be able to say the necessary things, to serve my interests better than the state itself does. That is the moment factions begin to substitute for sovereign authority in people's everyday calculations.

5.4. Maintain the equilibrium

The riots in France in October 2026, which grew out of school and cost-of-living protests, illustrate how quickly this equilibrium can shift - with the state losing vertical power, and politics polarising as people turn towards the extremes. In the aftermath, polls suggested that Marine Le Pen's National Rally and Jean-Luc Mélenchon's France Unbowed were best positioned to benefit, while the political centre struggled.

The riots showed how factions could use force with limited consequence, that the national identity was fraying under competing pressures, and that the state had failed to look after the needs of significant parts of its population. These three factors (weakened enforcement, fractured identity, and neglected citizens) created a fertile environment in which factions could act with increasing boldness. France is not South Africa. But the direction of travel is recognisable to anyone who has watched what happens when all three factors erode simultaneously.

These three factors (order, identity, and legitimate delivery) are not independent policy levers. They form a system, and the failure of any one accelerates the failure of the others. A state that stops delivering for its citizens loses the legitimacy that makes people defer voluntarily. A state unable to cultivate a common identity among its citizens finds mutual trust and cooperation declining, and its enforcement increasingly drawn into conflict between factions. And a state that cannot provide law and order loses its credibility and monopoly on violence.

These three points may seem obvious, but unfortunately, obvious things have a way of being overlooked when they are managed by specialists in separate departments who never compare notes or have time to reflect on the big picture.

There is a final complication. All three foundations must be rebuilt within the frameworks described earlier, which constrain how a state can enforce order, shape identity and allocate resources. I am not proposing that frameworks be dismantled. But a government serious about restoring its authority will at some point need to decide which frameworks still serve citizens, and which have quietly started to hamstring sensible and legitimate power, and inadvertently serve factions instead.

Conclusion

Five insights stand out as I reflect on this essay and what I've written, and what I hope to convey to you. I hope to challenge or help refine your mental models for understanding politics, especially in unstable times.

First, I wanted to introduce a thought that I find both clarifying and sobering: that the UK government is not itself the sovereign. Frameworks are. Constitutional law, human rights legislation, international treaties, judicial precedent. These sit, in practice, above the government, and also Parliament, in the same structural position that God occupied in the medieval political hierarchy, with lawyers and judges as their clergy. This is not necessarily wrong. But it creates a paradox: frameworks designed to protect citizens from an overbearing state may, if they weaken the state too far, leave those same citizens exposed to something worse. South Africa did not lack frameworks - its constitution is modern and internationally lauded - but the country lacks a state capable of enforcing them.

Second, I wanted simply to give you an insight into South African politics through the lens of factions. What is intuitive to South Africans, and to many across Africa, may be genuinely novel to someone in the UK or another developed country. The fifteen factions I described are a lived reality that people navigate in their day to day lives and not a theoretical construct.

Third, I wanted to offer a complementary way of thinking about politics: not only in terms of left versus right, or the agendas and manoeuvring of political parties, but in terms of factions vying for power, resources, and legitimacy. This lens does not replace conventional political analysis. It rather sits alongside it and sometimes explains things that conventional analysis cannot.

Fourth, I wanted to make the case that a state must have and deploy sufficient power to keep its factions in check. Without that power, it cannot act in the long-term interests of its citizens, cannot implement a coherent strategy, and cannot navigate the turbulent, competitive and uncertain world we all inhabit.

Fifth, I wanted to show that this power rests on three interdependent foundations: the monopoly on force and ability to maintain order, a shared national identity, and the genuine delivery of citizens' interests. When one or two of these fail, the state is left with outright coercion as its only tool, and a state that rules by force alone has already lost in the deeper sense.

In conclusion, the UK is in a far stronger position than South Africa, and I say that as someone who chose to make my life here. But that strength is not guaranteed and it is not static. The UK government would do well to remain mindful that factions are starting to coalesce, though they are not yet fully formed. Even in the five years I've been here, I have seen the shift. The UK government must actively maintain its three foundations of authority before they erode beyond repair. The frameworks above it, however well-intentioned, cannot save it if the state beneath them loses the capacity to act. The sovereign, in the end, is whoever people believe can actually enforce the rules. That is worth remembering.