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PSA Political Insight

Title: Government in Waiting? The UK Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer

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Article:

The old adage tells us that it isn't oppositions which win elections; it is government's that lose them. If that is true, Britain's Labour Party must be as happy as can be. The Conservative government they face had three Prime Ministers in 2022, with Liz Truss lasting for just 46 days before her catastrophic crashing of the economy cost her the top job. Thousands of public sector workers are on strike demanding better working conditions, increased funding in their sectors and increased pay and pension rights. The current government is mired in scandal – from the resignation of Owen Patterson[1] to Boris Johnson and Richard Sharp (the Chair of the BBC)[2], partygate[3], Nadim Zahawi's tax affairs[4], Dominic Raab and bullying allegations[5] and Suella Braverman's resignation after breaking of the Ministerial code and returning to Cabinet six days later[6]. All of this is coupled with a cost-of-living crisis, high inflation, low productivity figures and continuing problems caused by, or exacerbated by Brexit and the trade issues it has caused.

Britain is, again, looking like the sick man of Europe and almost all of this can be laid at the feet of the Conservative government, after 13 years in office. Even those things which have not been directly caused by the government, such as increasing fuel prices caused by the war on Ukraine, have damaged the government who have been seen not to have had any contingency plans and to have under-invested in key areas of the economy, which might have lessened the impact of such external factors. Labour HQ should be in the pink – waiting patiently for the next general election where they can sweep to power on a wave of anti-Tory sentiment. But, is that true? Does a dysfunctional government mean success for the opposition, and, if it does, what does that mean for Keir Starmer's Labour Party?

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[1] Forrest, Adam and James, Liam (23/11/22) 'What did Owen Paterson do? Everything you need to know about the Tory lobbying scandal', *The Independent*, available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/what-did-owen-paterson-do-b1952077.html

[2] Clinton, Jane (28/01/23) 'Boris Johnson was "told to stop seeking Richard Sharp's advice on finances"', *The Guardian*, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/jan/28/boris-johnson-asked-to-stop-seeking-richard-sharps-advice-on-finances-reports-say

[3] Nzanga, Merdie (No date), 'What we know about Boris Johnson and Britain's "partgate" scandal', *USA Today Online*, available at: https://eu.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/2022/06/06/what-britains-partygate-scandal/7530428001/

[4] Honeycombe-Foster, Matt (29/01/23) 'Rishi Sunak fire Minister Nadhim Zahawi after tax investigation', *Politico*, available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/rishi-sunak-fires-minister-nadhim-zahawi-after-tax-investigation/

[5] Mason, Chris and Eardley, Nick (02/02/23) 'Dominic Raab bullying probe another ticking time bomb under PM', *BBC News website*, available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/rishi-sunak-fires-minister-nadhim-zahawi-after-tax-investigation/

[6] Syal, Rajeev (28/10/22) 'Suella Braverman stays silent as rapid cabinet return reignites Tory row;, *The Guardian,* available at: https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/oct/28/suella-braverman-stays-silent-as-rapid-cabinet-return-reignites-tory-row

How does Labour continue to lose?

British politics has hardly been boring over the last decade, and there have been several electoral surprises. Britain saw a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition between 2010 and 2015, which contributed to the electoral collapse of the Liberal Democrats and its leader, the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg left politics for a career working with Mark Zuckerberg at Meta (Facebook). The victor in that battle, David Cameron, won the 2015 general election before spectacularly resigning after the 2016 EU referendum when he failed to win a vote to remain in the EU. Unlike Clegg, Cameron moved into his garden shed to write his memoirs. His successor, Theresa May struggled with the implications of Brexit and the splits in her party, leading them into a lacklustre 2017 general election. Her opposition, led by Jeremy Corbyn, did see some improvement in their vote, but even against such a split government, the Labour party couldn't win and the Conservatives entered a period of co-operation with the DUP.[7]

The Conservatives, and Labour, continued to tie themselves in knots over Brexit before May's resignation and replacement with Boris Johnson. He sailed to an 80-seat majority in the December 2019 election, caused Jeremy Corbyn to resign and Keir Starmer to take the reigns of the party just as Covid-19 began to bite. The Conservative government, since 2010, have given their opposition plenty of opportunities to strike a lethal electoral blow, and there have been 4 since and including 2010, but the Labour party simply have not been able to deliver a victory. It seems that even a weak, split, potentially broken Conservative party are capable of defeating Labour in the polls. That being the case, Rishi Sunak's poor polling and scandal-ridden government might be more optimistic about their chances than the polling suggests. Clearly, being the opposition (and not the Conservatives) is not a way to guarantee success, so how can Labour, and Keir Starmer, secure victory?

The Corbyn Leadership

While Jeremy Corbyn's time as leader did not deliver a Labour government, and certainly caused divisions within the party, no-one could deny that Corbyn energised certain parts of the Labour movement, and the wider electorate. For those on the left, particularly those who were young (although not exclusively those under 30), Corbyn and his supporters gave them something to believe in.[8] He gave them a vision of the UK where public ownership and nationalisation were accepted and implemented with a societal acceptance of higher public spending and investment. For some, their belief in Corbyn energised them and it caused them considerable upset and disillusionment when he resigned as leader. For some, no other leader, would be able to recreate the excitement they felt under the Corbyn leadership. For others, while another candidate could be found, it would need to be

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[7] 'Confidence and Supply Agreement between the Conservatives and Unionist Party and the Democratic Unionist Party' (2020), UK Government official website, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/conservative-and-dup-agreement-and-uk-government-financial-support-for-northern-ireland/agreement-between-the-conservative-and-unionist-party-and-the-democratic-unionist-party-on-support-for-the-government-in-parliament

[8] Pasha-Robinson, Lucy (14/06/17) 'Election 2017: 61.5 per cent of under-40s voted Labour new poll finds', *The Independent*, available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/election-2017-labour-youth-vote-under-40s-jeremy-corbyn-yougov-poll-a7789151.html

someone from a similar ideological position. The replacement of Corbyn with another member of the left-wing of the party, or even a Corbyn-lite version was, for those who blamed Corbyn for the perpetual failure of the party to gain power between 2016 and 2019, unthinkable. For those individuals, a more centrist figure was required to appeal to disillusioned Conservative voters and floating voters, both of which are needed for the party to win a general election.

The 2019 general election not only secured Johnson his majority and virtually guaranteed the resignation of Corbyn. It also changed the composition of the Conservative party, bringing many pro-Brexit MPs onto the government benches, and removed a number of MP's, perhaps the most famous being Laura Pidcock.[9] In the leadership campaign which followed, several potential candidates came forward, including Lisa Nandy, Emily Thornberry, Jess Philips and Rebecca Long-Bailey. However, the candidate to beat from the beginning was Keir Starmer, and he remained a formidable candidate throughout. During the campaign he committed himself to several of Corbyn's policies, although his general commitment was not necessarily the same in detail as Corbyn's. However, once he became leader, he was almost immediately accused of abandoning those promises and moving Labour into a more centrist position. While the manifesto for the next general election has obviously not yet been published, it does seem likely that Starmer made some commitments to gain the leadership, which he may abandon in his quest for Downing Street. He would not be alone in abandoning some of his principles for power, but will that matter to the wider electorate?

What is the Starmer vision?

With the Conservatives in tatters, many voters may vote Labour in the next general election simply to communicate their dissatisfaction and anger. However, for an unknown number, simply not being the Tories is not enough.[10] Starmer will never be able to bring many Corbyn supporters back to the Labour party. His role as chief plotter and disloyal shadow cabinet member will forever be their lasting memory of him. For others, Starmer has already reformed the key elements of the internal party machine to remove Corbyn supporters from key roles and 'detoxify' the party. Perhaps the largest group falls into neither of these categories. For those individuals, both members of the party and those outside the party within the general electorate who are sympathetic to the message of the Labour party, Starmer is yet to prove himself or to really create an identity for himself and his version of the Labour party. Starmer needs to give the electorate a vision, a reason to vote Labour rather than simply not voting Conservative. But what would that vision be? For those who have previously voted Conservative, some policies would simply be unsellable. For example, a policy to re-join the EU would be popular in some places but would potentially drive away almost as many voters as it would attract. A commitment to renationalise the water

[9] Speare-Cole, Rebecca (22/12/19) 'Former Labour MP points finger at Tony Blair for election defeat as row over Labour's leadership continues' *The Evening Standard*, available at: https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/former-labour-mp-laura-pidcock-tony-blair-election-blame-labour-leadership-row-a4319896.html

[10] Thornton, Lottie (03/11/22) 'Now that Sunak is PM , how do he and Starmer compare in the eyes of the public?' *Yougov*, available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/11/03/now-sunak-pm-how-do-he-and-starmer-compare-eyes-pu

companies or the railways would, likewise, potentially drive away important floating voters in constituencies with long-standing Conservative allegiances. The different needs and expectations of the groups which Starmer and Labour need for victory is at the heart of this problem.

Opposition parties often find themselves in a tricky situation in the mid-cycle period of general elections. Making detailed proposals opens them up to criticism from those in government and the media and changing circumstances can mean even useful policies can gradually become irrelevant. When that happens, detailed policy proposals can become a stick with which the opposition can beat you. By being vague on policy proposals a party certainly gives the opposition less ammunition, but it also makes them appear vague and unable to answer the big questions of the day. It can be easy to criticize but if you can't offer a policy answer yourself, how are you a government in waiting? Starmer's Labour have, unsurprisingly, followed the latter of these two approaches, offering up only small-scale policies which they believe will be agreeable to much of their electorate. For example, abolishing the 'Non-Dom' tax status is unlikely to be unpopular amongst voters across many socio-economic groups across the UK, and therefore unlikely to offend any potential Labour voters.[11] How to deal with the cost-of-living crisis is a far tricker issue. Tax rises could certainly impact on potential voters, and feed into the existing historic narrative of Labour as tax-rising, big-spenders and therefore would be unwise for any opposition party to make.

The outcome of this is that the Labour party currently lacks identity. Many voters don't know what Starmer or his party actually stand for, what their vision in.[12] While that could change between now and the next general election (expected to be sometime in 2024), it does create a challenge for the Labour party. How can the electorate positively vote for Labour if they don't know what they stand for? This is at least part of the reason why Starmer has focused much of his time as leader on his personal character, suggesting that his personal values tell the electorate what kind of leader he would be and the general priorities of his party. This is a trait often used by leaders – a shorthand to tell the electorate who they are without actually telling them what they want. If we think of any of the more famous Prime Ministers, all had their own public personality – Churchill, Wilson, Thatcher, Blair. For those leaders, their policy priorities were often not well known or full fleshed out before entering office, something which Starmer and his team may be relying on.

What next?

Opinion polls suggest that currently, not being the Tories might be enough for Starmer to win the next general election.[13] However, general election campaigns can be rough, and a party can rarely rely on their opposition simply being awful enough to secure them a victory. It does happen, but even the worst governments can rally on occasion. As we edge closer to

[11] Morales, Alex (25/04/22) 'UK Labour Party vows to scrap Non-Dom tax status held by Chancellor Sunak's wife' *Bloomberg News*, available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2022/11/03/now-sunak-pm-how-do-he-and-starmer-compare-eyes-pu

[12] Yougov data available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/does-the-labour-party-have-a-clear-sense-of-purpose

[13] Yougov data available at: https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2023/02/03/voting-intention-con-24-lab-48-31-jan-1-feb-2023

the next general election, Labour will walk the tightrope between policy generality and important details to try and indicate to the electorate that they know what they need to do, without making any hostages to fortune or giving the opposition a stick with which to beat them. The signs look good for Starmer's Labour party, and Starmer has shown himself to be able to play the long game and bend his own party to his will. That might be enough for the electorate – the anyone but the Tories argument – but giving people a reason to believe in Labour will become necessary, either before the next general election, or very soon after, regardless of the result.