

What Next for Labour Leader 'Steady Eddie' Keir Starmer?

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We're already experiencing the campaign election taking shape, and it's none too pleasant.

Both sides appear will assume attack is the best form of defence.

However, an election that'll determine the direction the country takes and, of course, our collective future, there's a feeling of added gusto.

For former chancellor Rishi Sunak, winning the next general election would offer the prospect of his party being in power for over 15 years and the possibility, assuming it gains a decent majority, of almost two decades in government.

However, as opinion polls suggest, this likelihood looks extremely slim.

Rather, Sunak, who took over his party following market turmoil caused by Liz Truss' notorious 'mini budget', appears to be heading towards an election defeat as significant as that suffered by the Tories in 1997 when Tony Blair's 'New' Labour achieved victory with a majority of 179.

This heralded a seismic shift in the political landscape and led to Labour winning the next three general elections.

It's worth recalling that in 2010, Labour then led by former leader Gordon Brown, in losing 91 seats, had been subject to Conservative attack that it had 'crashed the economy' in spending huge amounts of money on profligate projects.

The economic situation in May 2010 continued to be dominated by the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.

This, a crisis of confidence in banks across the world, necessitated intervention by governments in every developed economy.

Working in cooperation with other chancellors, chancellor Alistair Darling – who died last November aged 70 – was responsible for financial support that, it's estimated, exceeded £137 billion, mainly in the form of new capital and loans.

Now widely acknowledged by the vast majority of economic commentators that employing phenomenal firepower was essential to allow the financial system to continue to function, many, particularly on the right, argue that it would have been better to have allowed a form of financial Armageddon to have occurred.

The market would 'correct' itself though, it should be pointed out, this would have had serious consequences for all of us.

Let's face it, the results of markets losing confidence were obvious in the immediate aftermath of the mine budget.

Whilst most of the money spent by Labour in 2008 has since been recovered by the treasury, the accusation that Labour cannot be trusted to manage the economy continues to be used by the Conservatives.

Undoubtedly nervousness as to such allegations is a primary reason in Labour having jettisoned its commitment, should it win the next election, to invest £28 billion in the green economy each year until 2030.

Shadow treasury secretary Rachel Reeves' argument that until the party gets into office it can't be certain of being able to deliver such an expensive commitment, rings hollow to many voters who, after almost 14 years of Tory government, believe radical intervention is needed (Stacey, 2024).

Significantly, it's reported, immediately prior to dropping Labour's green pledge, Reeves accepted £10,100 from a Bernard Donoghue, a Labour peer who's previously stated during a debate on climate change in Parliament those arguing in favour of intervention to reduce emissions are prone to "scaremongering" and "exaggeration" (Barr, 2024).

For many, the Labour Party's commitment to invest money in developing productive capability in innovative processes in order to make this country more resilient in energy use as well as improving recycling of precious resources seemed utterly logical.

Following the announcement by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) that the UK economy suffered two successive quarters of negative growth between July and December last year and is now in a 'technical recession' (Romei and Parker, 2024), means that investment is more urgent than ever.

Notably, the ONS have previously estimated that employment in 'green jobs' could create 'around 526,000 full-time equivalents (FTE) in the UK in 2020, compared with 507,000 FTE in 2015' and which would boost economic growth (ONS, 2023).

Little surprise that Labour has been roundly criticised for its volte face in dropping its commitment to investing in the green economy.

Former chief economist at the Bank of England, Andy Haldane, expressed his surprise at Labour's decision to Sky's Politics Hub With Sophy Ridge.

Stressing his view that the policy had been "big, bold and world-leading", he considered dropping its commitment to spend big, should it win the general election, would stymie investment in the UK's transition to net zero (Scott, 2024).

Haldane also told Ridge, that because the economy has "stood still" for the last two years, the sort of investment in the green economy promised by Labour, was urgently required to ensure more money circulating due to jobs created as well as increased tax receipts to provide the additional funding urgently needed for public services.

Toby Helm and Michael Savage undoubtedly speak for many in the title of their Guardian article "The mother of all U-turns': after Labour's £28bn green policy climbdown, what's left?' (2024).

Quoting a 'senior insider in the backbenches', who believes the way Labour has handled the dropping of its £28 billion green commitment has been "demoralising and dispiriting", Helm and Savage relate concern Labour is now too cautious:

"If we can't invest for the long term in climate change without worrying about what the Tories are going to say, then when will we be able to invest in anything for the long term?"

However, Labour's leadership appear to believe that being free of the £28 billion investment commitment each year until 2030 gives the party freedom to attack the Conservatives in having "crashed the economy":

"Previously, we wanted to attack Jeremy Hunt after reports that he wanted to "max out" the government's fiscal headroom with tax cuts. We weren't able to do that because the [£28bn] figure became a distraction. Now we can."

However, as Helm and Savage believe, again quoting a party insider, dropping the £28 billion green pledge has undermined Starmer and made him vulnerable to attack from within Labour and from the Conservatives (ibid):

“He dropped most of the 10 pledges he made during his leadership campaign. Now he undermines his five missions by dropping this. People will have a right, the Tories will have a right in the run-up to an election, to ask: what is this guy about? What does he really believe in?”

However, Labour is discovering the route to power is paved with all sorts of unanticipated traps resulting in the party's leader being seen as either indecisive or inconsistent (or both!)

Starmer's handling of comments made by its, now former, prospective candidate for the Rochdale seat Azhar Ali to Labour party activists concerning Israel is a case in point.

Ali claimed Israel had been aware of Hamas' attack on 7th October last year.

Similar to conspiracists who claim American intelligence had prior knowledge of Al Qaeda's murderous attack on September 11th but allowed it as a pretext to conflict against the 'axis of evil' including Iraq, Ali asserted that Israel had let the Hamas slaughter its citizens as an excuse to attack Gaza.

Having initially supported Ali, following new comments made by him in a recording of the meeting being published by the Mail (Line, 2024), Starmer suspended Ali meaning there will be no Labour candidate when the by-election takes place in Rochdale on 29th February.

A consequence is that former Labour MP George Galloway, expelled in 2003 for bringing the party into disrepute because of his opposition to the 'Global War on Terror' taking place following September 11th, and supported by the Labour Government, could be elected to Parliament as MP for the Workers' Party and use this as a forum to voice opposition to Israel's actions in Gaza (Ball, 2024).

Not for the first time, Starmer's judgement is being questioned (Parker, Uddin and Williams, 2024).

Sky's chief political correspondent, Jon Craig believes Starmer's sacking of Azhar Ali 'is the biggest disaster for Sir Keir Starmer in his nearly four years as leader of the party' and worse, will be a 'massive gift' to the Conservatives who had no chance of winning Rochdale (2024).

Craig, like many, asks whether this could herald the 'end of Labour's seemingly unassailable poll lead?' (ibid).

Following Starmer's decision to suspend Ali the Labour Party, and having discovered a second prospective candidate had attended the same meeting when Ali made his comments.

Graham Jones, Labour's candidate for Hyndburn, was heard to criticise British people choosing to fight for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and suggested, incorrectly, this was illegal and those engaging in such action should be "locked up" (Prinsley, 2024).

Jones is now also suspended.

As reported in the Guardian, critics within Labour believe Starmer's behaviour to be based not so much on the factionalism and the continued quest to detoxify his party of antisemitism, but due to "his slow decision-making process and a failure of political instinct" (Stacey, Courea and Adu, 2024).

Unlike former leader Tony Blair, who won three elections for Labour who, though still dogged by his personal support for America's invasions of Iraq, declared in by former -United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan "illegal", Starmer does not seem to possess acutely tuned political antennae.

Some contend his approach to leading labour is far too similar to that he used when he was Director of Public Prosecutions.

It's to be noted that Blair tolerated the vast majority of his MPs who opposed the party's stance on a number of issues.

This included a certain Jeremy Corbyn who proudly proclaimed his support for a range of liberation struggles (McCabe, 2020).

Corbyn succeeded Ed Miliband who is credited as architect of Labour's now dumped £28 billion green investment pledge.

In the aftermath of Labour's defeat, its widely believed, Miliband had been elected as leader by members to wishing to distance the party from Blair's leadership that led to the UK's disastrous support for America's invasion of Iraq.

Overthrowing the Saddam Hussein's regime led to an intense vortex of internecine violence in Iraq and Syria resulting in untold misery amongst those displaced and hundreds of thousands killed.

Corbyn was regarded as the ultimate antidote to Blairism.

However, despite the Labour Party's pretty decent result in the 2017 general election under him, Corbyn's equivocation on Brexit combined with allegations of tolerance of antisemitism led the party suffering the spectacularly dreadful outcome in December 2019, its worst result since 1935.

Sir Keir Starmer, who served as Shadow Brexit Secretary under Corbyn, was elected as leader to ensure the party could engage in recovering from the December 2019 election.

Those on the left of his party contend he has been far too partial in advancing the careers of those on the right of the party and hindering those on the left, especially MPs associated with Corbyn.

Significantly, an Equality and Human Rights Commission inquiry was carried out in 2020.

This body discovered evidence the Labour Party under Corbyn had been responsible for unlawful acts of discrimination and harassment.

In what many on the left believed to be a way of demonstrating Labour under Starmer was 'under new management' and that antisemitism would never again be tolerated, the party's national executive committee resolved in March 2023 not to endorse Corbyn standing again as its candidate at any future general election.

Despite all this, it appears, Starmer's quest to restore Labour to power for the first time since 2010 may be undermined by being seen simultaneously too partisan in supporting Israel in its response to the attack by Hamas last October and too lenient in not dealing with antisemitism within his own party.

A headline in The Telegraph 'This almighty mess leaves Starmer indistinguishable from Corbyn' (Harris, 2024), suggests the difficulties confronting Labour.

Having enjoyed a large lead in the polls for the last year or so, it will feel brutal if this lead is diminished not by the what the Conservatives offer, but from the perception that Labour is divided and does not represent itself as sufficiently attractive to those hoping for it is capable of delivering radically different policies that will collectively improve the economy and society in general.

Though there were early indications that Labour's lead had slipped (Gibbons, 2024), in winning the two by-elections held on Thursday in Kingswood and Wellingborough suggest the latest poll showing the party with a 20% lead remains intact (Corfe, 2024).

Achieving victory in former Conservative minister and author of *Britannia Unchained* Chris Skidmore's former seat Kingswood in South Gloucestershire by overturning his majority of 11,220, a swing of 16.4%, well in excess of the 11.4% needed nationally by Labour to form the next government certainly appears to have put an end to any temporary jitters.

However, in winning Brexiter Peter Bone's seat, Wellingborough in Northamptonshire with a swing of 28.5%, Labour more than emphasised its position as the party likely to win the next general election.

Bone, removed by the Conservatives last December after being found to have subjected a staff member to bullying and sexual misconduct, and which led to suspension and a recall petition he lost, had a majority of 18,540 at the 2019 general election.

So, it seems, whatever turbulence Starmer suffered immediately prior to the by-elections in Kingswood and Wellingborough, has passed.

As eminent psephologist Sir John Curtice contends following these by-elections, the Conservatives are in "deep, deep electoral trouble" (Grunewald, 2024).

Indeed, that Reform UK led by Richard Tice received 13% of the vote in Wellingborough and the number of votes achieved exceeded the gap between Labour's Damien Egan and Conservative runner-up Sam Bromiley certainly suggests that Sunak a leader under greater pressure than Starmer.

However, as the last week has demonstrated, politics can be cruel, and nothing can be taken for granted.

Much can change between now and the next general election.

The Guardian's Martin Kettle asserts that Labour, and Starmer in particular, must reflect on recent events and see them as a 'wake-up call' and recognise that its large lead in opinion polls should not allow it to be complacent (2024).

Keir Starmer, regardless of how impressive the results in the result in Kingswood and more especially, Wellingborough, should not consider himself immune to the obligations and expectations that apply to all other political leaders at Westminster.

Though being seen as a 'Steady Eddie' has served him well in reviving the fortunes of his party, what voters really want to see is radical intervention and the sort of dynamic leadership, as promised by Conservative leader Boris Johnson at the last general election, and likely to transform prospects and opportunity for them and the next generation.

Steven's latest chapter, 'Boris Johnson, the green shopping trolley', was recently published in Toxic News? Covering Climate Change, edited by Mair, Ryley and Beck and published by Bite-Sized Books, London

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