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# Round Table: The Starmer Labour Government in Historical Perspective

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## Introduction

The election of Sir Keir Starmer's Labour Party on 5 July 2024 after fourteen years of Conservative (mis)rule may represent an important turning point in British political history. At any rate, this was how the new Prime Minister represented his party's 'landslide' victory. Starmer made two short speeches that day, the first to supporters outside London's Tate Modern art gallery, the second to the wider public outside 10 Downing Street. Similar in many ways, they were angled differently. The keynote of the first was the necessity for 'Change', which had been Labour's endlessly repeated slogan during the election campaign. What that would mean in terms of practical policies designed to transform the country had been unclear to say the least, and Starmer was loath to provide any real illumination still. But he was emphatic about what had made his electoral success possible, which was that he and his supporters had 'changed the party' – thinly veiled reference to the defeat of the left alternative that developed after Jeremy Corbyn was elected leader in 2015.<sup>1</sup> Addressing a wider audience in his Downing Street acceptance speech, Starmer sensibly chose to emphasize two other themes instead, namely the pressing need to restore faith in politics as public service, and 'national renewal', whatever that might mean.<sup>2</sup>

Arguably, then, Starmer's victory can best be defined negatively, in terms of the defeat of the challenge from the socialist left. In this context, it would be good to know more about the political economy that underpinned Starmer's success and how Labour came to be regarded as the best bet for significant fractions of capital that had become disillusioned first with Boris Johnson's mix of buffoonery and Churchillian posturing, and then with the disastrous Liz Truss. One important index of this shift was

1 "‘We did it’: Starmer's speech to supporters in full", *BBC News*, 5 July 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c2j3nxd4kz0o> (accessed 22 January 2025).

2 'Keir Starmer's first speech as Prime Minister', *GOV.UK*, 5 July 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/keir-starmer's-first-speech-as-prime-minister-5-july-2024> (accessed 22 January 2025).

the way donations flowed into Labour coffers before the election, not the small amounts that helped fund Momentum's campaigning, but millions from wealthy donors such as Lord Sainsbury. Notwithstanding support from business, voters had hardly been enthused by the mantra of 'Change'; while post-Brexit and post-COVID exhaustion helps explain some of the apathy, it is significant surely that although Labour won an impressive number of seats, its 'landslide' was secured with a voter turnout of around 60 per cent, the lowest since 2001.<sup>3</sup> Little wonder that Starmer wanted to address the so-called democratic deficit and voter disillusionment that political scientists have been writing about for years and which probably says more about the common sense of an electorate increasingly bored by what often appears a meaningless game than it says about anything else.

Having defeated the left and got their hands on the levers of power, Starmer's faction needed to fill the empty category 'Change', eventually settling somewhat unimaginatively on the necessity for 'Growth', the latter a precondition for the former. As Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rachel Reeves has understandably taken the spotlight and there have been some initiatives designed to encourage greater private investment in British industry.<sup>4</sup> Saving public services will have to wait until these deliver the goods, unfortunately, as raising government revenue through increasing income tax and VAT has been strictly ruled out, one promise from Labour's manifesto that appears sacrosanct. Payback of sorts, perhaps, for support from wealthier individuals concerned about 'national renewal', although money has had to be found from somewhere to patch up the damage wreaked by the Conservatives and their allies across the public sector, most recently from increases in national insurance and inheritance tax, creating the inevitable furore. Such difficulties are likely to recur, as Starmer's Labour muddles through as best it can.

Regardless of the faltering start, Labour historians might reasonably expect to fare better under a Starmer government than they have under other administrations. As in other respects, however, it would be unwise to raise hopes unduly. Only Nick Thomas-Symonds and Rebecca Reeves have demonstrated any real interest in the history of the party, publishing biographies of various leaders. While Starmer himself has declared admiration

3 D. Clark, 'Voter turnout in general elections and in the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom from 1918 to 2024', *Statista*, 7 August 2024, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1050929/voter-turnout-in-the-uk/> (accessed 22 January 2025).

4 See the contributions to the 'Responding to Rachel Reeves' Mais Lecture' round table in *Political Quarterly*, 95 (2024), 576–97.

for Harold Wilson as a committed ‘modernizer’, this is probably because Wilson was good at getting himself elected, and is also not tainted morally as Blair has undoubtedly been by the Iraq War.<sup>5</sup> Over time, a more unfortunate similarity might transpire that, like Wilson, Starmer will come to be legitimately regarded as a Prime Minister to whom everything happened and who was responsible for nothing.<sup>6</sup> Starmer does like to invoke his class background for political gain when occasion allows – declaring in his acceptance speech without a hint of irony, for instance, that Labour’s mission was to create the ‘security that working-class families like mine can build their lives around’ – though he uses class in a descriptive sense, not as a critical tool to expose inequalities of wealth and power or to understand how societies have worked in the past.

If the signs might not be as positive as we would like, the election of Starmer’s Labour nevertheless represents some kind of watershed, and it seemed to us that it might be interesting, after the initial euphoria had died down, to ask a number of historians of Labour and class to reflect on the historical significance of Starmer’s government. They were given a very wide brief by the editors and no attempt was made to shape their contributions to this round table, which suggest various contexts for better understanding the meaning of Starmer’s Labour.

- 5 Andy Beckett, ‘A lesson from Harold Wilson to Keir Starmer: don’t let the right undermine Labour’s achievements’, *Guardian*, 5 January 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/comment-isfree/2024/jan/05/harold-wilson-keir-starmer-legislation-general-election-2024> (accessed 22 January 2025).
- 6 E.P. Thompson, ‘Yesterday’s manikin’, in E.P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London, 1980), 51.