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Here Comes the Sun: Can the UK General Election Really Inspire Hope?

Katy Brown

<https://www.illiberalism.org/here-comes-the-sun-can-the-uk-general-election-really-inspire-hope/>

The 2024 UK general election brought seemingly few surprises. The [polls](#) painted it as a foregone conclusion from the get-go, and veritably, the years of austerity, corruption and cruelty finally saw the government's popularity divebomb. Conservative leader Rishi Sunak's rain-drenched announcement of the vote set the tone for a bleak and uninspiring campaign on many fronts. In contrast, when Labour's landslide was all but confirmed, now-Prime Minister Keir Starmer celebrated his constituency win by claiming that a "[sunlight of hope](#)" was shining on Britain.

For many, of course, the dawn of a new post-Tory era is rightly cause for celebration. It has undoubtedly taken too long for the sun to set on a government that has pursued sharply regressive policies and rhetoric during its tenure, worsening the lives of many communities in the process. Whether it has been [Windrush deportations](#), [universal credit transition](#), or [failures to ban conversion therapy](#), there have been countless [devastating](#) and [deadly effects](#) of this period of Conservative rule.

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News of Labour's emphatic win may therefore come as welcome relief for many, offering the chance to reverse the tide and change the direction of travel within UK politics. With 30% of children [living in relative poverty](#) and the top 10% of the population [owning 57% of the wealth](#) while the bottom 50% own just 5%, the stakes are incredibly high. Clearly, many Britons cannot afford more of the same. And yet, Starmer's Labour has offered little indication that progressive transformation is anywhere on the horizon. By digging into the campaign, result, and implications, we can learn much-needed lessons about the work that is still to be done and from where some glimmers of hope might be gleaned.

A Labour landslide?

As the results came flooding in on July 5th, UK newspapers were [unanimous](#) in their characterization of the outcome, with front page headlines such as "Keir Stormer" and "Keir we go: Starmer and Labour in thumping landslide victory." Much of the media and political commentary that followed hailed Starmer's success at [turning Labour's fortunes around](#). Of course, the sizeable parliamentary majority that the party obtained is undeniable, as it more than doubled its number of seats and secured 291 more representatives than the Conservatives. It was certainly a huge swing that brought an end to 14 years of Tory rule.

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However, it doesn't take long for cracks to appear in the narrative that Labour has seen an almighty resurgence inspired by Starmer's political leadership and nous. If you compare the performance to prior elections, Labour's vote actually [declined](#) from 12.9 million in 2017 to 10.3 million in 2019 to 9.7 million in 2024. Their vote share increased marginally this last time around, from 32% to 34%, but we can hardly talk about a dramatic surge in popularity. In fact, a YouGov poll the day before the election showed that 48% of Labour voters cited their main reason for backing them as a way to "[get](#)

[the Tories out.](#)” Put in this context, the election’s result appears not so much emblematic of an endorsement of Labour but rather a rejection of what came before.

Consequently, while the term “landslide” may characterize the outcome, it seems to paint an exaggerated picture of the shift that occurred. However, if we look at it from the other direction, perhaps it is an appropriate metaphor after all, in that the existing ground was severely weakened and fell away dramatically. The Conservatives’ vote plummeted from nearly 14 million in 2019 to 6.8 million in 2024, dropping by more than half. It turned out that Tory “safe” seats [were not so safe after all](#), with former Prime Minister Liz Truss failing to defend a majority of 26,000, former defense minister Grant Shapps receiving 10,000 fewer votes to lose his seat, and prominent Tory politician Jacob Rees-Mogg dropping nearly 25 percentage points to come second. A spectacular fall from grace this may be, but it had been brewing for quite some time as the list of scandals and crises created and exacerbated by the government grew exponentially: NHS waiting times, river pollution, PPE contract corruption, child poverty, housing shortages, and many more.

Labour’s main slogan and rallying call was “change,” but clearly that change refers to the mode and style of governance rather than an alternative ideological vision.

It’s understandable, then, that many were motivated by the desire to move on, but it remains a concern that few seemed enthused by what Labour put on the table in terms of ideas. According to the same [YouGov poll](#), only 5% of Labour voters responded that their decision was based on the party’s manifesto and policy. Contrast that [to 2017](#), when it was the top reason for 28%. In a sense, this falls in line with the party’s main approach to the election, where they campaigned on a platform of putting an end to Tory “chaos.” Somewhat ironically, Labour’s main slogan and rallying call was [“change,”](#) but clearly that change refers to the mode and style of governance rather than an alternative ideological vision.

No clearer has this been than in their critiques of immigration policy, claiming that the Conservatives were [not effective enough](#) at “stopping the boats” rather than challenging the premise and advocating for the necessity of safe routes. This failure to put forward progressive alternatives may not have hindered their path to power—brought about predominantly as it was by the halving of the Tory vote—but it does show that beneath the gloss of a landslide victory lies some shaky ground on which to build.

The rise of Nigel Farage?

To further destabilize these foundations, another [headline-grabbing](#) development was the re-entrance of Nigel Farage into the electoral fray and the subsequent performance of his new party Reform UK: the latest iteration of the British ([or rather English](#)) far right that rose from the ashes of the UK Independence Party and the Brexit Party. Farage had previously ruled out personal involvement, but one month before the vote, he announced his candidacy and the inevitable [media frenzy](#) ensued. Farage has attracted hugely disproportionate political and media attention for years compared to his parties’ popularity and performance, with this time around [no different](#). [Research](#) from Loughborough University showed that Farage was the third-most covered individual in media reporting during the election build-up, with only Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer featuring more prominently. This trend is not unique to Farage, though he has been a prime example, but rather reflects the broader media fascination with the far right and failure to grapple with the [dynamics that reporting itself feeds into](#).

With such a leg-up, one might expect the far right to capitalize significantly on Conservative unpopularity, and to some extent they did. Reform returned 14% of the vote and gained five MPs in

parliament, a record number of seats for a far-right party in the UK. They also came second in 98 constituencies, with only seven behind the Tories and the remainder second to Labour. These results seem to line up with early analyses indicating that Reform absorbed a sizeable portion of defecting Conservatives—it is suggested that [23% of 2019 Tory voters](#) turned to Reform, nearly half of all those who switched their allegiance. This performance by the far right is of course very concerning, and the following discussion does not seek to detract from the seriousness of it by any means, but like the “landslide” characterization, there is more to unpack than initially meets the eye.

First, prior results challenge the idea that this election evidences the [rising popularity](#) of the far right in Britain. While the Brexit referendum outcome in 2016 saw such groups lose their main *raison d’être* and consequent electoral success, in 2015 UKIP received only marginally fewer votes than Reform in 2024. Thus, it is not so much a question of growth but a [return](#) to pre-Brexit levels.

Additionally, if we account for [voter turnout](#) in this election—one of the lowest tallies in UK general election history at 60%—Reform attracted only 8.4%, i.e., one in twelve registered voters. This figure paints quite a different picture from 14% or one in seven, especially as it does not include residents who are unable to vote, such as non-British or non-Irish citizens. Again, such discussion does not diminish the significance of the far-right vote in 2024, but it underscores that we should not exaggerate its resonance, as people overwhelmingly voted against rather than for Reform. We must therefore avoid hyping and [legitimizing](#) it as representative of the “popular will.”

That said, the danger posed by the far right should certainly not be dismissed or overlooked completely. The presence of five Reform representatives in parliament threatens to exacerbate their already over-inflated presence in media coverage and to provide an even larger platform for their exclusionary politics. We have already seen [widespread reporting](#) on Farage’s first parliamentary speech, a privilege not afforded to most incoming MPs. Should this new position see him, his party, and crucially their ideas amplified further, we could witness an even greater acceleration of the mainstreaming of far-right politics in the UK.

The mainstream as protection?

Some may think, what better way to neutralize the far right than with a Labour government at the wheel? This perspective ties into common depictions of mainstream parties as our [protectors](#) against the far right, keeping it from power by offering “moderate” and “sensible” politics instead. A [recent article](#) by Tony Blair in the Guardian encapsulates the flawed logic that underpins such a generalization, with the former Labour prime minister advocating for Starmer to “keep grip on immigration to tackle the rise of far right.”

The idea that you beat the far right by adopting far-right positions is as contradictory and [ineffective](#) as it sounds. Not only does this not work on Blair’s terms, as far-right parties often benefit from such moves in the long run ([just look to France as an example](#)), but this kind of claim also ignores the deeply harmful impact on those who are targeted, instead reducing them simply to pawns in a strategic game. Regardless of who puts forward these policies or conveys this rhetoric, the effects on those at the sharp end remain the same and can be even more damaging when enacted by people with real power to implement and disseminate them. We must never lose sight of this impact because for the vulnerable, playing this game is [simply not an option](#).

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As such, the mainstreaming of the far right is just as much, if not more, [about the mainstream](#) as it is about the far right itself. Yes, Farage can make waves, but who has been responsible for the growing inequality the country has seen? And who has failed to challenge that meaningfully in opposition? Our attention should not just, or even primarily, be directed at the “usual suspects.” Beyond the far right itself, as embodied by Farage, Reform and others, the [prevalence of exclusionary politics](#) at the heart of the mainstream is accelerating at an alarming rate. Countless examples within the previous government attest to this trend, whether it is the [repackaging](#) of extreme-right conspiracy theories, the [implementation of unjust policies](#), or the [normalization of exclusionary discourse](#). Starmer too has invoked moral panics about “[gender ideology](#),” engaged in [racist scapegoating](#), and [endorsed](#) Israel’s collective punishment of Palestinians. When it comes to mainstreaming far-right politics it is clearly not just to the far right that we must look, lest we risk missing what’s right in front of us.

“Sunlight of hope”?

In this context, where we have a profoundly uninspiring (purportedly) “center-left” party, a hyped far right, and the widespread mainstreaming of exclusion, one might question whether talk of hope is misplaced. Some will say that Starmer is going to shift towards more progressive causes now that the party has secured power and that there have already been promising signs on that front. While such a move would of course be welcome, especially after setting the bar so low, the government has wasted little time displaying its intentions. In many cases, the damage has already been done.

Yes, Labour scrapped the Rwanda scheme, but the reasoning they gave was based on ineffectiveness, not inhumanity, and Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has said that Britain’s border security remains her [key priority](#). The discourse and policies that the new government is pursuing would not seem out of place were they voiced by Farage, or any other far-right party for that matter. Writing in *The Sun on Sunday* this week, Cooper vowed to “[fast track](#)” deportations by carrying out raids on car washes, nail bars and beauty salons, under a headline containing the phrase “illegal immigrant blitz.” There has of course been no plan to prioritize the need for asylum seekers to have access to [safe routes](#) either, with the urgency of this measure only emphasized further by the [tragic deaths](#) of four people as they tried to cross the English channel in early July.

Other recent developments elucidate the troubling kind of politics we might expect from this government. For instance, it has repeatedly failed to commit to removing the two-child benefit cap, a [key driver](#) of child poverty. When seven Labour MPs rebelled to support the Scottish National Party’s amendment for it to be scrapped, they had the Labour whip [taken from them](#) for at least six months. In effect, they were suspended for supporting measures to help lift children out of poverty—quite the stance for a party promising hope. And what about the [sustained attacks](#) on the trans community that Labour has continued while in office, with its calls for a [damaging permanent ban](#) on puberty blockers? Or the [institutional racism](#) that saw Diane Abbott and Faiza Shaheen treated so poorly? Or the failure of Starmer and senior figures to stand against genocide as [thousands of Palestinians](#) have been killed?

In this electoral context then, it is not from the government that glimmers of hope emerge, but rather those constituencies in England and the devolved nations where people mobilized around more progressive parties and candidates. For example, despite the Green Party receiving significantly less media attention than many others, notably Reform, they still managed to secure four seats and significantly increase their vote share. Certainly, these remain modest gains, but they offer an opportunity to hold Labour to account in parliament. Another representative who will surely look to do the same is former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, whose own win (like other independent

candidates) spoke to the mobilizing potential of alternative visions based on a [progressive platform](#). We can also look across the channel, where the shock result for the New Popular Front showed that it is possible to [win elections from the left](#).

Of course, we must not exaggerate these successes [nor be complacent](#) moving forward, especially as the far right also increased its parliamentary representation. Nonetheless, such results challenge dominant narratives that appeasing the far right is the way to beat them. Finally, politics is much bigger than elections, and we have seen some inspiring movements around Black Lives Matter, Palestine solidarity and climate justice gain important momentum in the UK and beyond. It is these acts of collective resistance and support that can allow us not only to weather the storm but to find our way to clearer skies ahead.

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