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Between Farage and failure

Under pressure, the British prime minister scored points at the Labour Party conference in Liverpool. But his future will be decided elsewhere

Keir Starmer knows how to bring world politics to London. Whether it's Europe's future, the war in Ukraine or the skilful use of the royal family to appease the self-proclaimed monarch in Washington, when it comes to foreign policy, few can hold a candle to the British prime minister, as even his critics now admit. Domestically, however, the Labour leader has recently appeared surprisingly weak. His first year in government, marked by technical errors and what many observers considered incredible ignorance of his own voter groups, was met with miserable approval ratings from the British people. Before the party conference in Liverpool, many comrades rubbed their eyes in disbelief. How could the party squander the trust it had gained from a resounding election victory and the political weight of an absolute majority in the House of Commons?

Starmer's greatest adversary, Brexit veteran Nigel Farage, effortlessly exploited a communication vacuum in Downing Street for weeks. Not only did this boost his own popularity ratings, it also reinforced the impression that British society was leaning towards his positions on issues of asylum, migration and integration. Farage's agitation for a ruthless 're-migration policy' and his nationalist call on social media to defend the English flag against supposed enemies fell on fertile ground. This ground had been prepared for years by former Tory heavyweights such as Priti Patel and Suella Braverman.

Inspirations and influences

The boundaries of what could be said publicly about refugees or other minorities had already shifted far to the right-wing populist camp under conservative governments. But even among the Social Democrats, a group of MPs is now campaigning under the banner of 'Blue Labour' for the adoption of Denmark's uncompromising migration policy. Left-wing party critics, on the other hand, gathered shortly before the start of the annual meeting under a new umbrella called 'Mainstream'. In a kind of

palace revolution, they openly challenged Andy Burnham, the mayor of Manchester, who is popular with many members.

Under pressure, Starmer's spin doctors, as if awakening from a deep sleep, presented a nearly perfect script for the party conference. With three heads of government – Australia's Anthony Albanese, Canada's Mark Carney and Denmark's Mette Frederiksen – they presented the crème de la crème of the global progressive elite as a kind of opening act in the heart of Westminster, even before the party conference had begun. The signal was clear and the selection was no coincidence: all three had recently prevailed in successful election campaigns against various right-wing parties.

Above all, the Danish Social Democrats' programme was recently considered by Labour strategists to be the ultimate weapon in the fight against extremists. From Albanese and Carney, on the other hand, they wanted to learn how to win back voter groups with a forward-looking, positive narrative.

Armed with this intellectual ammunition, the Labour entourage left the capital heading north under the motto 'With a little help from my friends' to close ranks in the city of the Beatles and present themselves to the British public as the better alternative to Reform UK. 'Does anyone still remember the Tories?' Starmer shouted into the conference hall, triggering great schadenfreude.

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No one seriously believes anymore that it will be the Conservatives who will be facing the 2026 regional and local elections. This was followed by Starmer's attempt to give his party a kind of agenda again, even though, according to his colleagues, he 'hates visions'. However, the impetus provided in Liverpool was not without controversy. With unusually aggressive rhetoric Starmer directly attacked Nigel Farage, calling him a social divisive figure. At the same time, he ran the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater and insulting Reform UK voters in the process.

Borrowing from Albanese and Carney's handbook, the prime minister deliberately focused on a positive narrative under the party conference slogan 'Renew Britain': social engagement, the helping hand of

neighbours, the unifying power of football. At the same time, he emphasised that Britain was not 'broken', as Farage likes to claim, but had enormous potential. However, the subsequent list of everything that needs to be repaired in terms of infrastructure in the coming years, requiring great effort and painful financial cuts, seemed inconsistent — a contradiction that political commentators immediately identified as a weakness.

A common enemy

Starmer faces a dilemma. If he leads the party too far to the right, his voters will migrate to Reform. If, on the other hand, he offends the sensibilities of his academic, urban supporters, they will turn to the Liberal Democrats, the Greens or even the excommunicated Labour leader Corbyn. This careful balancing of the political scales remains the greatest challenge for Starmer, a lawyer by training. So far, this does not appear to be a stringent strategy, but rather mere tactical manoeuvring.

While his Home Secretary Shabana Mahmoud, from the Blue Labour camp, announced very ambitious tightening of residency rights in a speech to the astonished plenary, intended to appease the British sense of justice but still subject to judicial review, Starmer gave other cabinet members free rein in interviews to win back the heart of the party. Ed Miliband was allowed to continue invoking climate targets, Rachel Reeves announced a much-anticipated increase in child allowances, Wes Streeting fought audibly for the rights of LGBTQI people, and Starmer himself finally fought for compliance with the standards of the European Court of Justice.

Despite all the doom and gloom, Starmer said, the British are not a racist, heartless society. In the plenary session, he had small plastic flags distributed and invoked 'British values': compassion, decency and tolerance. He received backing from a survey of more than 45 300 people, which asked about 80 problem areas. According to the survey, citizens are primarily concerned about *uncontrolled* migration, but high living costs, energy prices and the housing shortage are also high on the list of priorities.

Labour intends to continue addressing these specific problems in the remaining four years of the legislative period. However, 'deliverism,' the mere ticking off of to-do lists, is unlikely to appease broad, emotionally agitated voter groups. What people have been lacking so far is a vision of the country they will live in in the future. Here, Starmer once again drew on his role models in the Commonwealth and invoked 'progressive patriotism'. This must suffice as a vision, he said, because there will be no

'Starmerism' with him.

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The Labour entourage is back in London, and Starmer is back in the saddle. The common enemy is welding the party together. Finally, according to one EU-friendly delegate, Starmer is naming names and holding Farage responsible for the consequences of Brexit. At last, according to other voices, the party has rediscovered its soul and clearly identified overt racism. After much criticism of his 'politburo', which allegedly shielded him too much, 'Keir can be Keir again'.

Starmer has made one thing clear: the next election will be a choice between him and Nigel Farage. This deliberately chosen dichotomy is having an effect. In a recent poll, 45 per cent were in favour of Starmer, compared to only 33 per cent for Farage. The figure is even higher (71 per cent) among voters who voted Labour in 2024 but have since turned their backs on the party. Support is highest among those who had switched to the Greens or Liberal Democrats in the meantime: 95 per cent.

Regional elections are due to be held in Scotland and Wales in May 2026 — a crucial test of sentiment for the Labour government. If Starmer's party performs poorly there, it could significantly limit his political room for manoeuvre and raise doubts as to whether he can really implement his programme for the renewal of Britain by the end of the legislative period. His future will therefore not be decided on the world stage. Nevertheless, he has gained noticeably in confidence on the domestic political stage.



Michèle Auga
London

Michèle Auga heads the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's office in the UK and Ireland. Previously, she headed the Sub-Saharan Africa and Western Europe/North America sections of the FES in Berlin as well as the FES

offices in Mali, the Palestinian Territories and at the United Nations in New York.