

# 'CHANGE'?

*Previewing the 2024  
UK General Election*



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Jonathan Rutherford

On the evening of May 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak surprised everyone by calling an early general Election on 4<sup>th</sup> July. He did so outside No.10 in the pouring rain, a fitting end to his calamitous Conservative government. Labour quickly launched its election campaign with the simple slogan 'Change'. Around Westminster there is much excitement. But what about the mood in the country?

The cultural theorist Raymond Williams calls this kind of cultural mood a 'structure of feeling'. Unarticulated and lacking political representation it nonetheless defines the times we are living in. As the election campaign begins there is a widespread understanding that the country has changed, both demographically and economically, in profound ways. We have become a disoriented culture unsure of who we are. Working people know that the economy does not work for them or their families. Wealth is extracted rather than created, enriching asset holders at the expense of wages and incomes. Our public institutions, utilities and services are in a chronic state of underinvestment and disrepair, their bureaucracies unresponsive to the public. Nothing works.

The popular mood is both angry and fatalistic, a desire for change and disbelief it will happen. Voters do not trust politicians nor believe they are capable of solving the country's multitude of problems. The 2016 EU Referendum campaign exposed the gulf between the educated classes in the cities and university towns, and the rest of the country. Populism revitalised democracy but broke the rules of the political game. In the aftermath of Brexit the parties in Westminster floundered. Now over seven years later they crowd onto the political centre ground they have reconstituted. But the centre ground imagined in Westminster no longer exists in the country.

In these inauspicious times Labour has led the Conservatives by 20 points in the polls. Once a party dominated by the organised working class, its new heartlands are now in the major cities and university towns amongst the liberal middle classes and minority ethnic groups. A majority of its membership resides in London. It is a party of abstract progressive values such as equality, diversity, and sustainability. Its cultural insularity means that even today its front bench and leaders office have no-one who voted to leave the EU.

In contrast the majority of voters have a more conservative disposition, believing in liberal freedoms and holding to values that are intuitively about reinforcing the social norms and identities of their culture, their family, their work, and their country. It is a clash of class and culture that split Labour's coalition and contributed to its four consecutive UK general election defeats. In the last General Election in 2019 Labour's vote fell across all social classes. Only professionals and minority ethnic groups [resisted](#) the anti-Labour trend.

To reverse the party's fortunes, its new leader Keir Starmer redefined Labour as a patriotic party, defending the economic interests of working people and adopting more conservative values. In his first major campaign [speech](#) he repeated this message, recognising the loss of trust in politicians and promising that he has changed Labour permanently. But Labour is an instinctively liberal progressive party and it struggles to authentically represent the kind of conservative left politics that will command a majority. No-one is quite sure who or what Labour stands for. The uncertainty is compounded by the arid technocratic pragmatism expounded by Starmer himself.

The adman Sir Frank Lowe understood the necessary political alchemy to win the political common ground. He has said that a party must communicate with the voters 'in a way that shows them a vision and a philosophy that they themselves already wish to embrace'. To this end, Labour has used the Union Jack in its campaigning material as a signifier of national unity. It is intended to signal that Labour believes in a common national culture with a common language and a shared, national history. But waving the flag is a substitute for a leadership that has struggled to rise above identity politics and define a political narrative of belonging and nationhood.

And yet 'hope springs eternal'. Despite its limitations could Labour fulfil its promise of 'Change' and forge the beginning of a new political settlement?

Labour's Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves in her recent [Mais Lecture](#) outlines a contemporary version of Labour's post-war economic nationalism and the clearest and most substantive statement so far of how Labour would govern. She argues that her economic policies represent the beginning of a new economic settlement.

They herald a 'decade of national renewal' that will shape the institutional architecture of the British economy with the central mission to restore economic growth.

Her analysis of the structural and systemic problems of the UK economy marks a break with neo-liberal orthodoxy. She identifies the end of globalisation 'as we know it', and believes that where things are made and who owns them matters. She refers to the national economy which is rooted in the places people live and defined by the territorial boundaries of a democratic polity. Industrial policy will focus on the everyday economy and its largely female workforce that sustains all our daily lives. And in contradiction to New Labour, Reeves argues that entrepreneurial risk taking and workers capacity to move jobs to better their circumstances requires stability, safety and security.

Reeves has set out an incremental policy programme which could begin to break with the governance approach of neo-liberalism. She aligns herself with US Secretary of the Treasury, Janet Yellen's idea of modern supply side economics, and the neo-mercantilism of National Security Adviser, Jake Sullivan. Harvard economist Dani Rodrik has called this emerging consensus, productivism, the demand for government to link the development of the national economy to geopolitical strategy and to create social stability and security in order to reconstitute their social contracts. As Rodrik writes, 'Mercantilism is alive and well. Its continuing conflict with liberalism is likely to be a major force shaping the future of the global economy'. Labour's Shadow Foreign Secretary David Lammy has made this link between foreign policy, trade and national economic development in an essay on 'The Case for Progressive Realism' in Foreign Affairs (2024).

Despite this emerging viewpoint, the Labour leadership has no political strategy for governing. Instead there are repeated references to plans for net zero, for industrial strategy, for housing, for work, for regional development and for a host of other policy areas. Some are non-existent and none are joined up into a coordinated programme of national renewal. To compound this problem, in order to reassure the electorate Labour is committed to no tax rises and to the spending limits set by the Conservatives. Its promise of national renewal will be dependent upon the private sector uniquely investing for the longer term in those areas suffering un-development.

This 'levelling up' of the regions by devolving power and boosting regional economic growth and social renewal was the Conservative promise of Brexit. They dismally failed. Labour took up this programme but the leadership has neither grasped its political significance nor recognised that regional social and economic development is incompatible with its ambitions for net zero. These latter involve decarbonising the electricity system by 2030 and turning Britain into an energy super power are nevertheless wishful thinking. For now they shore up Labour's vulnerable green flank.

National renewal is also vulnerable to the pressure of the New Labour old guard which favours a liberal economics that focuses policy on economic agglomeration in the cities. Tony Blair's Institute is a dominant force in Labour's policy world, promoting a vision of meritocratic expertise and the technological revolution as the principle drivers of economic and political change. The technocratic bypassing of political democracy, a failure to boost the fortunes of towns and a net zero policy owned by the metropolitan middle classes are each capable of breaking up Labour's fragile coalition and igniting a populist revolt.

A further political hazard is Labour's confused and ambivalent relationship with identity politics. The leadership has avoided or closed down debate around contentious issues like race, Islamist extremism and pseudo-scientific ideas about biological sex. A Labour government stalled by intractable economic problems, unable to enact economic reform or generate sufficient private investment, is at risk of regressing into being the party of the HR department, enforcing bureaucratic social engineering around issues of race and gender and imposing speech codes on the population.

Few doubt Labour will win simply because of the overriding national desire to be rid of the Conservative Government. Labour politicians themselves are subdued. Those of us who have worked in and around Labour over the last decade, who have witnessed its lack of intellectual vitality, the erosion of its institutions that could facilitate political renewal, and the absence of a supportive hinterland of thinkers and writers, are apt to be sceptical about the party winning a large majority. Its lack of a political lodestar suggests it will struggle to navigate the stresses and crises of government.

The estrangement of government from those it governs is deepened by two politically inexperienced party leaders, neither of whom has captured the interest of the electorate. The political scientists Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue in *Democracy for Realists* (2016) that for the great majority politics is not about assessing the policies of one party against another. It begins with the question 'where do people like me fit in?' And then 'which party is for people like us?' Millions are no longer certain about these questions. They do not see politicians who share their life experience nor political parties that understand them.

Here we are in this extraordinary moment of existential challenge and diminished political ambitions. The rest of Europe is turning to the populist right while Britain after Brexit is going leftward, ironically rewarding the party that passionately opposed leaving the EU. This election will be an indicator of the future of mainstream social democratic parties across the capitalist democracies. Their progressive politics of the last few decades have driven away large parts of the working class, contributed to the social and economic damage of the neo-liberal period, and suffered the blowback of populism.

We are living in the end times of the neo-liberal settlement and its ruination of our social fabric and economy. A fair and just balance between individual choice and collective security, between rights and obligations, between society and the market, and between the interests of capital and labour must be restored and the populist right put to flight. Liberal progressive politics is over. The future is a conservative left. Can the British Labour party rise to the challenge? Let's see what this election brings.

*Jonathan Rutherford is a political adviser and writer. He was formerly a Professor of Cultural Studies at [Middlesex University](#).*