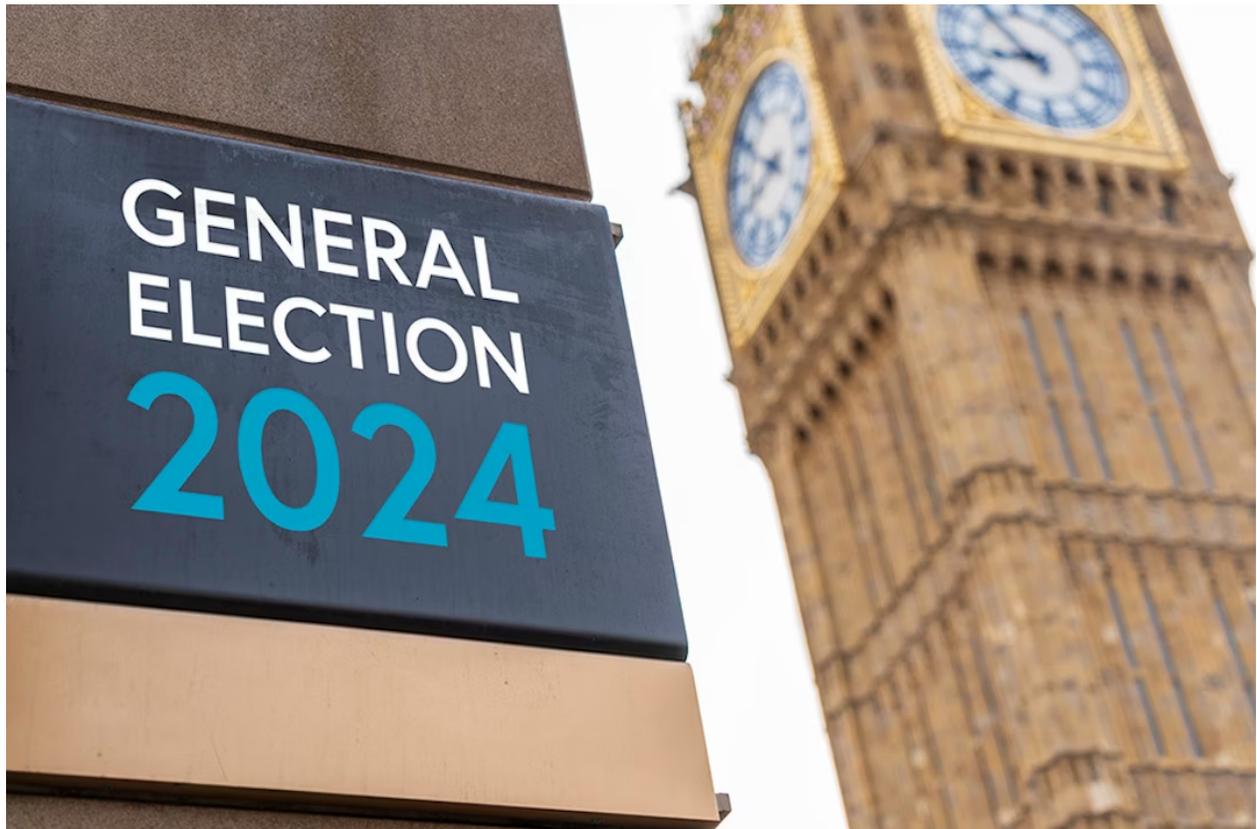


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# UK Election Result is a Victory for Ruthless Competence



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The Labour Party's victory in last week's parliamentary election in the United Kingdom proves the potency of bold, pragmatic centrism focused on addressing the nation's critical needs. Throughout their campaign, now-Prime Minister Keir Starmer, his campaign manager, Morgan McSweeney, and the entire Labour cabinet have consistently appealed to the broadest segment of the UK electorate. The party's platform—centered on delivering economic, national, and border security—offers the prospect of domestic stability and prosperity and starkly contrasts the dysfunction and incompetence that characterized the past 14 years of Tory rule.

Labour ran the same playbook Joe Bidens used in his 2020 campaign against former President Trump and the Polish Civic Platform coalition deployed in 2023 against the illiberal Law and Justice government. The consistency across all three elections validates the role of centrism and mainstream politics at a moment when it is under assault by radical domestic populists in the UK, in

the United States, and across much of Europe. It provides a roadmap for political parties in every country fighting against extremism.

At the same time, the Conservative Party must take a lesson from its defeat. The path for its return must include a rejection of the extremism of Nigel Farage and Reform. Voters did not abandon the Tories because the party refused to embrace far-Right migration, immigration, or energy policies. The party lost its way when it chose the populism cult of personality and governing incompetence of Boris Johnson over any clear vision or serious effort to steward the British economy or government services. Farage, or similar voices from within the Conservative Party would only extend this misery.

## Two Victories for Pragmatism Over Extremism

Labour's victory was not a foregone conclusion.

Some commentators will declare this is less a win for Labour as an "own goals" loss by the Tories. This doesn't tell the full story. The UK has suffered from aimless leadership and scandal from Conservative governments for years. The conservatives were not popular when the last UK election was held. But in 2019 Jeremy Corbyn was Labour's leader and had yanked the party far to the left. Voters rejected Corbyn's policy extremism and anti-Semitism, leading Labour to its worst defeat in a general election since 1935.

Keir Starmer recognized that Corbyn alone was not the problem. When he took over Labour in 2021, Starmer needed to restore trust with many alienated British voters and redefine what Labour stands for. The voters in the industrial Red Wall constituencies who abandoned Labour did not want radicalism. Nor did middle-class voters. They simply wanted a government that prioritized their economic and quality of life concerns and was unsullied by scandal or callousness.

Labour accomplished its transformation by first kicking out anti-Semites and Left-wing extremists in its own ranks. This enabled the party to move to the center on economics, security, crime, and net-zero in ways that were best for Britain and its own electoral prospects. It was these changes, reflected in Labour's manifesto, front bench, and candidates for parliament, that enabled it to credibly offer itself as an alternative to the Conservatives. Fourteen years in power presiding over the cost-of-living, NHS, and immigration crises, three prime ministers in short order, and repeated scandals primed the public for change. Without the reforms of the past four years, however, it is doubtful Labour would have been able to present itself as a viable alternative to the Conservatives.

This is a similar pattern to what we saw in the US in 2020-2022. In both countries, voters rejected the incompetence of the governing parties – and in the US the Republicans' MAGA extremism – and

trusted Labour and the Democrats respectively to govern from the center. Joe Biden's defeat of Sen. Bernie Sanders in the 2020 primaries helped him in the general election by reinforcing that he, and Democrats, weren't socialists. Moderate candidates in swing districts and states helped Democrats over perform in the 2022 Congressional elections. Voters want this to continue, electing moderate Democrats in off-year Congressional and gubernatorial elections, and rejecting far-Left candidates like Jamal Bowman in New York, and Jamie McLeod-Skinner in Oregon.

## Implications for the United Kingdom

Labour now has the much more difficult task of delivering for the British public. It should stay true to the pragmatic manifesto that helped secure such enormous margins on 4 July. There will be clamoring from the Left of the party and press for the new government to increase its ambition and public spending and liberalize migration policy. That would be the wrong move, and one we don't expect to happen.

Instead, we expect the government to look like the campaign; focused, and efficient. Actions like planning reform, industrial strategy and domestic investment in skills and manufacturing, particularly in clean energy, and restoration of basic government services like an efficient NHS will go a long way. It is not flashy, but it will reduce costs for a public that has suffered horrible inflation and provide certainty to businesses and investors that will yield first economic stability and then growth.

Stabilizing the economy and the cabinet after years of reshuffles also gives Labour the opportunity to reassert its international leadership. This is particularly important because the UK is strongest economically, in its ability to deal with migration, clean energy, and democracy, if it is playing a role beyond its shores. There is an opportunity for the Foreign Secretary to create new compacts to coordinate supply chains and bring more investment and production in energy, biotech, and artificial intelligence to the UK, as well as strengthen alliances to counter the economic and security threats from China and Russia. We particularly need this now given the threats extremism poses in the US, France, and Germany.

## Re-establishing Clean Energy Leadership

Third Way's most extensive engagement with the UK is on clean energy issues. In January 2024, our affiliate Carbon-Free Europe and the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change analyzed the potential for the UK to expand its clean energy development and production. We found very significant opportunities in offshore wind, nuclear, and hydrogen, as well as many parts of clean energy supply chains. Change of policy and investment in these areas could play an important role in rebuilding Britain's economic stability.

The government's mission to make Britain a "clean energy superpower" is ambitious but achievable, and fully reflects the huge natural opportunities that the UK can unlock with the right policy focus. As our analysis shows, the UK has outstanding offshore wind resources, significant potential to expand nuclear energy, and the opportunity to become a major clean hydrogen production hub both for domestic use and for export.

To do this, it must stick with the politically-difficult task of enacting substantial planning reform, and find the means to capitalize Great British Energy and the National Wealth Fund. Much of the investment to build out Britain's clean energy infrastructure and supply chains should come from the private sector. The US experience of industrial strategy via the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law shows that this is possible. Much of the direct investment from the US policies is in early-stage innovation and demonstration projects. The commercial-scale projects the UK seeks to build will be well-served by the new funding mechanisms and two other actions. First, assuring the private sector has certainty that the government is committed to clean energy. Second, substantial progress is being made to reduce planning delays.

It will be important, in all of this, to watch the debate on net-zero. While the country may get to 90% clean electricity, it is incredibly difficult for the UK to achieve net-zero by 2030. Rather than focus on meeting a specific deadline or percentage, the Labour government would do well by ensuring that energy costs and emissions are declining and the economy is growing thanks to clean energy independence. It should resist the inevitable pressure from the far-Left to spend far more in public funds than necessary or impose onerous restrictions on the public. The Conservative Party must also resist pressure from its extremist flank and not politicize net-zero for political gain. The UK is a global leader on climate and clean energy and has much to gain economically because the issues are non-partisan. The damage of importing populist opposition to it could be grave.

## **Conclusion**

Labour's victory in the UK is most important for what it means to the British public: the hope that ruthless pragmatism and competence will reduce the cost of living, NHS, and migration crises that strain the country. This began with Keir Starmer's successful campaign to rebuild the Labour Party and restore the public's trust in it. It is also evidence that centrism wins elections. Now, both the Labour government and Conservative opposition face difficult tasks. Labour must remain true to its manifesto to stabilize the country, and ignore pressure and criticism from both its Left and Right flanks. The Conservatives must recognize that failing to adhere to a vision and deliver on it brought about defeat, and not fall to the allure of Right-wing populism.