

Keir Starmer's first 100 days as Labour leader: reassure first, transform (much) later



***Eunice Goes** offers an overview of Keir Starmer's first three months in office. She concludes that the leadership's strategy is to focus on winning back the trust of ordinary voters before it can move on to the business of transformative politics.*

In his first 100 days as Labour leader, Keir Starmer managed to achieve levels of popularity that eluded his two predecessors – Ed Miliband and Jeremy Corbyn – for the entire duration of their leadership terms. He is the [most popular leader](#) of the opposition since Tony Blair, and he has [overtaken](#) Boris Johnson as the voters' preferred choice for Prime Minister. He has also influenced government policy, namely the dropping of the surcharge on overseas NHS workers, and his calm, forensic, and merciless approach to Prime Minister's Questions has been praised even by the [Conservative press](#).

Considering that Starmer became Leader of the Opposition in the middle of a pandemic, these are no minor achievements. But the fact he has kept his agenda under wraps has unnerved the [Left of his party](#), which expects bold ideas in response to the extraordinary times we are living. It is true that apart from his [Ten Pledges](#) and from claiming that after the COVID-19 crisis the UK '[should not go back to business as usual](#)', the Labour leader has said very little about his vision for Britain. But there is method to Starmer's mystery. In truth, this method can be translated in the formula 'Reassure First, Transform (Much) Later' and is informed by the realisation, starkly highlighted by the party's recent electoral [post-mortem report](#), that Labour has no chance of winning a general election if it is perceived to be incompetent, unprofessional, too radical and out of touch with voters.

Recent polling shows that Labour still has a long way to go until it is trusted by voters. According to a [YouGov poll](#), only 21% of voters trust Keir Starmer's Labour to manage the economy. Moreover, the Prime Minister's recent [speech](#) on the economy gave a strong indication that the Conservative Party will fight hard to retain its new seats in Labour's former Red Wall.

Faced with a daunting electoral challenge, Starmer and his team know that before any detailed policy agenda can be developed and unveiled, Labour needs to establish its reputation as a credible government-in-waiting. To that end, Starmer [apologised](#) to the Jewish community for the pain the Labour Party caused them; reached out to readers of the *Daily Telegraph* with a [patriotic message](#) on VE Day about social care; started a monthly phone-in programme at LBC; sacked Rebecca Long-Bailey from the Shadow Cabinet with the aim of further dissociating Labour from antisemitic ideas; and dismissed proposals to [defund the police](#) made by the organisation Black Lives Matter.

Each of these stances reflects the advice of Starmer's Director of Policy, Claire Ainsley, to win back traditional Labour voters who defected to the Conservative Party at the last election. In her book [The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes](#), Ainsley argues for the adoption of a 'public attitudes-led policy making approach'. As Ainsley put it in this book, this approach to policy development starts from 'where people are on their economic interests and build up and out to challenge divisive social constructs like racism and sexism'.

There is ample evidence that the Labour Party under Keir Starmer is following Ainsley's advice on how to win the vote of the new working class. The most recent examples of Labour's endorsement of a 'public attitudes-led policy making approach' were Starmer's comments on [trans rights](#) and [Black Lives Matter](#). Similarly, we can see this approach at work in Labour's recent focus on proposing specific and workable solutions to very concrete and immediate problems related to managing the pandemic, namely proposing ideas to tweak the furlough scheme, insisting on protecting jobs and working on a safe reopening of schools, and on shying away from overblown attacks on the government and ambitious policy proposals.

Adopting a 'public attitudes-led policy making approach' does not mean that Labour will shy away from radical or principled socialist policies. In truth, Starmer's ten pledges tie him to some radical ideas like common ownership (though not necessarily nationalisations), devolution of power, redistribution of wealth and the Green New Deal. However, Ainsley's strategy to win back the votes of the working class requires Labour to be aware that more contentious policies 'need a longer warm-up than policies that already have public backing'. In other words, every policy idea will be tested by focus groups and opinion polls (as they already [are](#)) and will be presented, as Ainsley put it, in a narrative that reflects the core values of the average voter.

Again, Starmer and his team have already showed how this approach will work. At a recent [webinar](#) organised by *Another Europe*, the Shadow Chancellor Anneliese Dodds, who [supports](#) redistribution of wealth, the Green New Deal, and alternative forms of ownership, said that there were no signs that the pandemic had marked a shift towards left-wing politics, and insisted that what most voters wanted was 'security'.

The carefully thought-out interventions of Starmer and of members of the Shadow Cabinet suggest that Labour will not be proposing more policies than can be realistically implemented within a parliamentary term and that any bold proposals will be stripped off of any 'radical' connotations; it will be instead clothed in everyday and common sensical language. This means, of course, that it is highly unlikely that Labour will support plans to set up a Universal Basic Income or to scrap Trident or that tax rises will be presented as an attack on the rich.

In any case, Labour is in no hurry to make policy announcements so early into this parliament and at a time when there is so much uncertainty, with public attention focusing on the government's response to the pandemic. For all these reasons, Labour under Starmer will be spending quite some more time reassuring and winning back the trust of ordinary voters (and disappointing ardent Labour supporters) before it moves on to the business of transformative politics.

About the Author



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