

Build a prime minister

Ask a typical British voter to design a prime minister and they might pick one with a distinguished career in public service. They would probably prefer someone pragmatic over an ideologue. And they would certainly prefer someone serious (if boring) rather than a showman. Out of a line-up, they might pick a moderately handsome middle-aged man in a suit.

It is not just Sir Keir Starmer's profile that could have been designed by an opinion-poll respondent. His government has rigidly pursued the poll-derived priorities of a typical voter. The public approves of its stringent new regulations on private landlords, its expansion of employment rights and its tax raid on expensive homes. Rail nationalisation and minimum-wage increases have strong support in surveys. And when the government has stepped out of line (such as cutting winter-fuel payments for pensioners), a U-turn has promptly followed. Voters want, voters get.

The experiment in government-by-focus-group extends to social policy, too. By popular demand Shabana Mahmood, the home secretary, has squeezed net migration down to its lowest level in years. The government outlawed support for Palestine Action, a controversial protest group, and permanently banned the use of puberty blockers for trans children, in line with the public's socially conservative instincts. To an uncanny degree Sir Keir has moulded himself and his policies to the desires of British voters.

Yet they hate him. His approval rating is one of the lowest ever recorded for a prime minister, approaching the disastrous levels of Liz Truss. "Build-a-PM", the focus-group approach to governing, simply doesn't work.

You might argue that this is the result of incompetence, or the cost of governing at a difficult moment. But Sir Keir had negative ratings even before he came to power. In 2024 Labour managed just 34% of the vote in an election fought against the quivering

wreck of the post-Truss Tory party. Strikingly, polls show that the voters who supposedly stand to gain from Labour's policies have been the most eager to desert it. Low earners have left faster than high earners; private renters have flocked to the Greens; and trade unionists have abandoned the most pro-union government in generations. The fact that net migration has fallen to the lowest level since 2012 (excluding the pandemic years) hasn't dented the rise of Nigel Farage and his right-wing populist Reform UK party. Voters get, voters don't say thank you.

Instead, Sir Keir joins the long list of politicians who have lost themselves searching for the electoral equivalent of El Dorado. Opinion polls in many Western democracies have shown that most voters are economically leftist and socially illiberal. This quadrant is well-populated by voters and scarcely represented by politicians. Those who try to fill the gap tend to fail. Advocates of this approach often hailed the long-ruling Danish Social Democrats, whose migration-sceptical centre-left posture had supposedly crushed the far right. Inconveniently, the Social Democrats won their lowest share of the vote in over a century in March, while the anti-immigrant Danish People's Party made inroads. Sir Keir has arrived at El Dorado to find that there is no gold.

Chasing polls is a recipe for poor (and therefore ultimately unpopular) government. One reason is that it is often a mistake to take polls at face value. Ask voters about their preferences on migration, for example, and they will come up with proposals that would make Mr Farage blush. Yet many of the same voters tell pollsters they worry that Reform is too extreme (or even racist). During Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party his supporters clung to polls showing voters backed his hard-left economic initiatives. Yet plenty of them thought Mr Corbyn was a mad communist. (He led Labour to its worst result in 84 years.)

The bigger reason is that the public respects leadership, not followership. Walter Bagehot, the Victorian journalist and essayist after whom this column is named, wrote that voters "did not analyse very much: they liked to have one of their 'betters' to represent them." There is nothing incongruous about voters having one set of opinions and preferring another from their political leaders. People rightly expect

their politicians to be more virtuous than them. Is it hard to believe they respect politicians who are more moderate than they are, too?

There is little evidence that today's voters are notably different to the ones who elected Sir Tony Blair three times in a row, or David Cameron twice. Neither of the two longest-lasting prime ministers of the 21st century were shy about presenting themselves as centrists. Nor did they feel obliged to substitute public opinion for public policy.

The Blair pitch project

Nowadays Sir Tony is a bogeyman, especially among his own Labour tribe. Sir Keir and his prospective successors fell over themselves to denounce his essay, published on May 26th, which called for a return to "radical centrism". Sir Tony's treatise advocated embracing artificial intelligence, deregulating the economy and cutting welfare spending. What sets his intervention apart is that it is an ideological approach to Britain's problems. He is right that moderate politics need not be a strange grab-bag of focus-group-approved policies of the sort offered by Sir Keir—a mix that is despised in practice. Centrism can have a clear purpose.

Rather than heed Sir Tony, Labour is flirting with another variant of build-a-PM. Campaigning in Makerfield, where through a by-election on June 18th he is hoping to return to Parliament, Andy Burnham is triangulating. The most likely successor to Sir Keir has backed Ms Mahmood's immigration reforms and called for Labour to double down on left-wing economics. It will take more than switching the messenger to save Labour.