

**Labour Won a U.K. Landslide. Why Doesn't It Feel Like That?**

By [Mark Landler](#), Reporting from London, *The New York Times*, July 5, 2024

Britain's voters handed the Labour Party a landslide election victory this week, but one laden with asterisks.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer took office on Friday with a commanding majority in the British Parliament, yet in terms of the total number of ballots cast, his party won only a third of the vote, less than what it got in 2017 when it lost to the Conservatives. Labour made inroads across Britain, yet its wins were often eclipsed by the Tory losses, including that of Liz Truss, the unpopular former prime minister who was evicted from her seat.

The thundering mutiny of the voters may have been the single biggest message of Britain's election. It has ushered in a new era of Labour government, left the Conservatives to nurse the worst defeat in their history, and stands as a warning to incumbents everywhere of the hazards of failing to deliver on your promises.

But Labour's triumph was only one of several crosscurrents that revealed the extraordinary volatility of the modern British electorate: the rise of Reform U.K., an insurgent anti-immigration party, which won more than four million votes; the plummeting vote share of the major parties; the lowest voter turnout in decades, and the flare-up of the Gaza War as a campaign issue that stung Labour candidates, even Mr. Starmer.

While he comfortably held his own seat in London, Mr. Starmer won 17,000 fewer votes than in 2019, thanks in part to a challenge by an independent who channeled anger on the left over Labour's stance on Israel and the war in Gaza.

It all added up to a complex election that defies easy categorization: a landslide, but not a straightforward realignment of the political map; a pivot to the center-left, but one that gave the populist right a valuable foothold; a thumping Labour win, but without the euphoria that suffused Tony Blair's runaway victory in 1997. "A loveless landslide," one commentator said on Friday morning.

"We wanted change," said Anand Menon, a professor of European politics at King's College London, summing up the complicated state of British politics, "but we aren't inspired by Labour."

At one level, Britain's embrace of a center-left party sets it apart from the right-wing wave that is rising across Europe and possibly in the United States. When Mr. Starmer travels to Washington next week for a

NATO summit, he will be a fresh presence amid a depleted group of centrist leaders: President Biden, President Emmanuel Macron of France, and Chancellor Olaf Scholz of Germany.

Yet some analysts said the election should not be interpreted as an embrace of left-wing policies. The magnitude of Labour's victory is partly a function of Britain's winner-take-all electoral system, which tends to favor major parties over smaller ones. It also reflected the depth of the Conservative collapse, which was magnified by the capacity of Reform to siphon off right-wing voters.

"It's not a big shift to the left," said Tony Travers, a professor of politics at the London School of Economics. "Labour has massively moderated under Keir Starmer."

On Friday, Mr. Starmer signaled that he knew he had no time to waste acting on his party's lopsided majority: 412 seats, almost matching the number received by Mr. Blair in 1997. And he reached out to voters who had not backed Labour. "You have given us a clear mandate, and we will use it to deliver change," Mr. Starmer told cheering supporters after arriving at 10 Downing Street. "To restore service and respect to politics. End the era of noisy performance. Tread more lightly on your lives. And unite our country."

Hours after traveling to Buckingham Palace, where King Charles III invited him to form a government, Mr. Starmer installed his top team, including Rachel Reeves as chancellor of the Exchequer, the first woman to hold that post.

Mr. Starmer, analysts said, will have to act quickly to satisfy an impatient public. He has promised to jumpstart the economy by overhauling planning regulations and to shore up the overburdened National Health Service. But with Britain's ballooning public debt, he will have limited tools to begin what he has proclaimed a decade of national renewal.

Moreover, the emergence of Reform — which won 14.3 percent of the vote, compared to 23.7 percent for the Conservatives and 33.8 percent for Labour — suggested to some that Britain is still vulnerable to the kind of hard right populism that is on the march in France, particularly if the new government does not score some wins quickly.

Nigel Farage, the populist firebrand who leads Reform and was an early champion of Brexit, appeared to be trying to reinvent himself for that purpose. “There is a massive gap on the center right of British politics,”  
95 a jubilant Mr. Farage said to cheering supporters in the town of Clacton-on-Sea after he had won a seat in Parliament for the first time in eight attempts. “My job is to fill it, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Reform won only five seats, which will limit its voice  
105 within the House of Commons. But analysts say Mr. Farage could use his platform to torment the Conservatives at a moment when they are divided, dispirited, and open to the lure of the far right.

The centrist Liberal Democrats were another big  
105 winner on Thursday night, winning 12 percent of the vote and increasing their number of seats from eight to 71. They inflicted significant damage on the Conservatives in their heartland in England’s south and southwest. Among the priorities of the party, which was  
110 virulently against Brexit, is to forge closer ties to the European Union.

Reform U.K. and the Liberal Democrats underscored the rapid fragmentation of British politics. Together, Labour and the Conservatives won just 57.5 percent of  
115 the vote, their lowest combined share in the post-World War II period. In 2019, the two parties won 75.7 percent; in 2017, 82.4 percent.

Adding to the sense of political ennui was the voter turnout. At about 60 percent, it was the lowest since  
120 2001, when Mr. Blair won a second term.

Mr. Starmer acknowledged the depth of discontent with traditional political institutions in his Downing

Street speech. “It leads to a weariness in the heart of a nation, a draining-away of the hope, the spirit, the belief  
125 in a better future,” he said. “This wound, this lack of trust will only be healed by actions, not words.”

Professor Travers said traditional voting patterns had been upended in recent years, in part because of the rise of social media but also, he said, because dissatisfied  
130 people now use elections to send messages. “It is a realignment from being rock-solid for one party to being open to new parties,” he said. “People don’t vote the way their parents did. People don’t vote along class lines anymore. They are simply less aligned to political  
135 parties.”

This election was different from the last two elections in another important respect: it was not dominated by the debate over Brexit. Britain’s 2016 decision to leave the European Union barely registered  
140 during the six-week campaign, with neither party eager to re-litigate the arguments of the last seven years. Labour kept its focus on kitchen-table issues like the economy and the N.H.S.

But just because Brexit did not figure in the debate  
145 does not mean it played no role. The passions the referendum unleashed divided the Conservatives, pulling them in more extreme directions on issues like immigration. Many voters blame Brexit for Britain’s economic ills, either because it hobbled trade with  
150 Europe or, in the view of Brexiteers, because it was never properly implemented. “Brexit is still at the root of all this,” Professor Travers said. “The Conservatives damaged themselves because of it. Moreover, it’s now unpopular or thought to have been managed badly

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### **How 14 years of Conservative government have changed Britain**

Having presided through austerity, Brexit and the pandemic, among other challenges, the Conservatives were deeply unpopular heading into the general election on Thursday.

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Before Thursday’s landslide Labour victory, Britain had been led by the Conservatives for the past 14 years. But the party had grown unpopular.

There was a widespread feeling among voters that something had gone awry under Conservative Party government, that the country was stagnating, if not in perilous decline.

5 After 14 years with the Conservative Party in power, British voters are widely expected to usher in a new era of Labour Party leadership in Thursday’s election.

Nearly three-quarters of the public said the country is worse off than it was 14 years ago, the London-based pollster YouGov found in one survey before the vote. More than 46 percent of people believed it was “much worse.” And to some extent, economic and other data backed that up.

10 The Labour Party has won a landslide victory in the UK general election, sweeping into power after 14 years of Conservative rule on the back of a wave of public disillusionment.

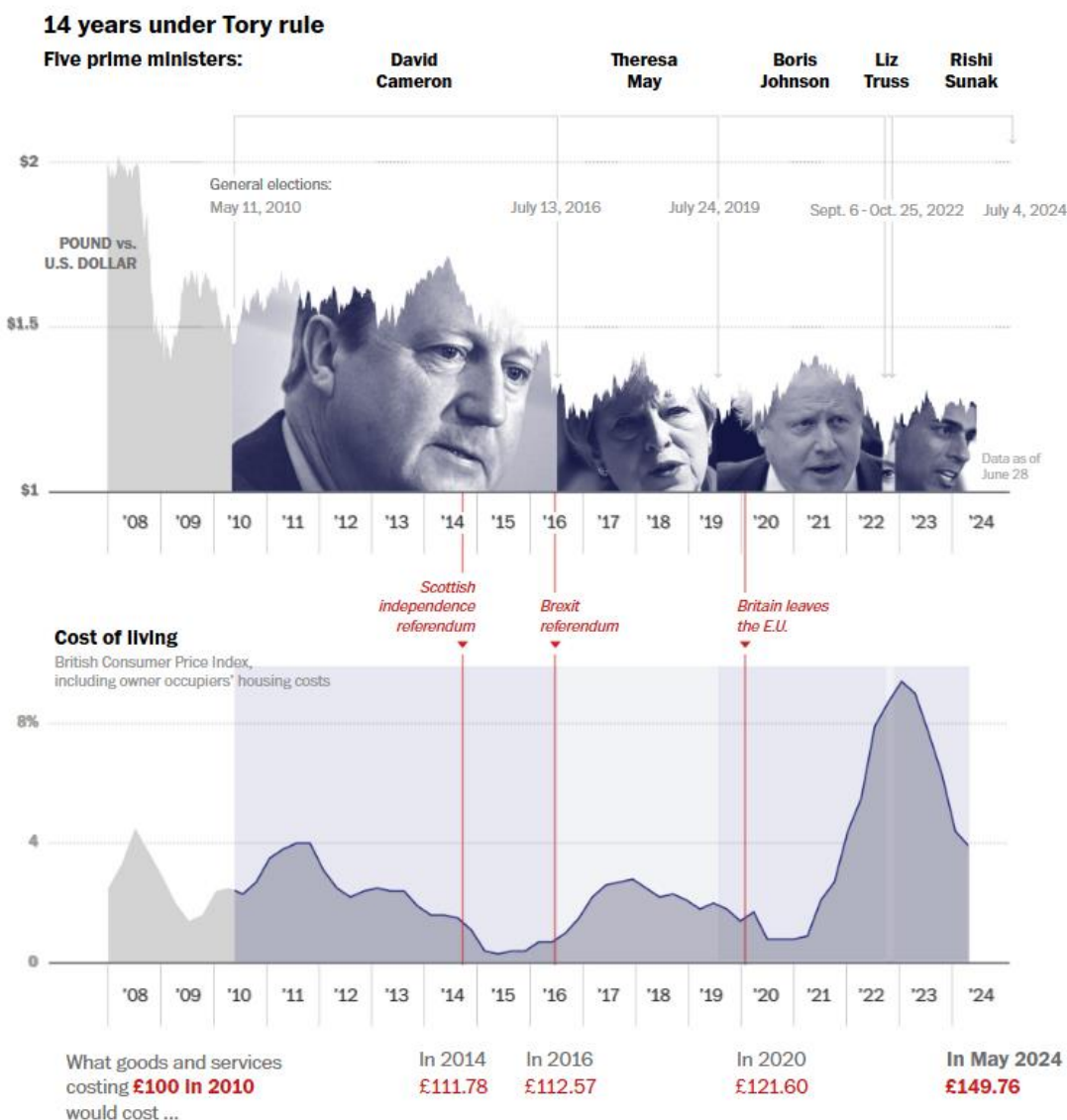
Party leader Keir Starmer took over as prime minister on Friday after King Charles III formally asked him to form a new government, with the politician promising the British public he would steer the country towards “calmer waters.”

Starmer, 61, begins his term with what is one of the biggest parliamentary majorities in British history and is expected to introduce a program of far-reaching reforms.

Addressing the nation from outside 10 Downing Street for the first time as prime minister, Starmer had one overarching message: Change starts now.

“It is surely clear to everyone that our country needs a bigger reset, a rediscovery of who we are,” he said, cautioning that the national renewal he was promising would take time. “Changing a country is not like flipping a switch, the world is now a more volatile place,” he said.

Meanwhile, the Conservative Party recorded the worst result in its history, prompting some commentators to observe that the overall election result was as much about British voters booting out the Conservatives as voting in Labour.



25 Sources: Britain's Office for National Statistics, Bank of England

At the least, it's been chaotic. Britain had five prime ministers in 14 years, including one who lasted just 49 days — the briefest tenure of a British government in hundreds of years. The country cycled through nine foreign secretaries and eight home secretaries.

30 There were four national elections, a vote on Scottish independence that failed and a vote on leaving the European Union that did not — yielding Britain's exit from the bloc.

But Brexit, approved by voters in 2016 and completed in 2020, was just one seismic shift. The Conservatives took the reins in the aftermath of a global financial crisis, watched as a pandemic hit Britain harder than many of its peers, and responded to a major land war on continental Europe.

35 On top of all that? The queen died.

The fallout from those 14 years was a focal point of Labour’s campaign. Party leader Keir Starmer, Britain’s new prime minister, has pushed for change. But how much of the challenge confronting Britain is the result of bad policies, and how much of it was unavoidable?

**Broken Brexit**

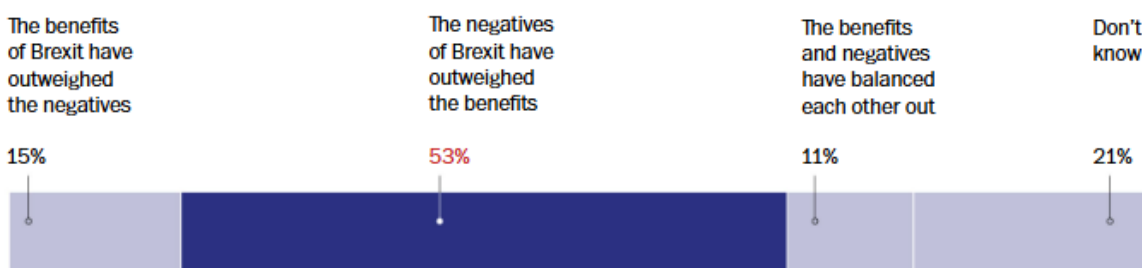
40 It’s funny, but nobody in Britain really wants to talk about Brexit anymore — except Nigel Farage.

In what many now consider a colossal political miscalculation, David Cameron kept Farage and his U.K. Independence Party in the Conservative fold for the 2015 general election by promising a Brexit referendum. His bet was that British voters would want to remain in the European Union. They did not. Within hours of the vote, Cameron announced his resignation. Theresa May’s premiership was consumed by Brexit chaos. Boris Johnson was a Brexit booster. So is Rishi

45 Sunak.

The people generally consider Brexit a flop. But there’s no going back — not quickly.

**Brexit: Benefits vs. negatives**



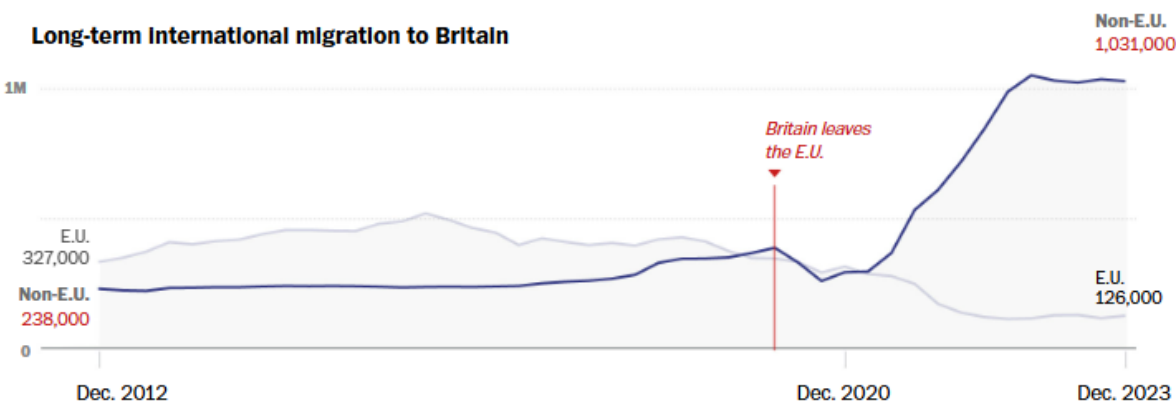
Source: YouGov

The “Leave” vote was driven in part by fear of immigration. Exiting the E.U. was supposed to give Britain greater control of its borders. In reality, net immigration has soared.

50 Cameron and May vowed to cap net migration in the “tens of thousands.” Johnson promised the numbers would come down. Sunak said he would “stop the boats” that were illegally crossing the English Channel and send asylum seekers to Rwanda. No flights have left.

Annual net migration has more than doubled since the start of Conservative Party rule. The nationalities have changed. Before Brexit, most long-term migrants came from member states of the European Union. Now, the majority

55 of immigrants come from outside the bloc. The top sources last year were India, Nigeria, China, Pakistan and Zimbabwe.



Source: Britain’s Office for National Statistics

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What’s driving the surge? Policy decisions. The government wants more international students, who pay a premium to 60 study at British universities, and workers to fill low-wage jobs in nursing homes and other fields.

## Austerity and health

65 Before Brexit, a different word hung over Conservative policy: “austerity.”

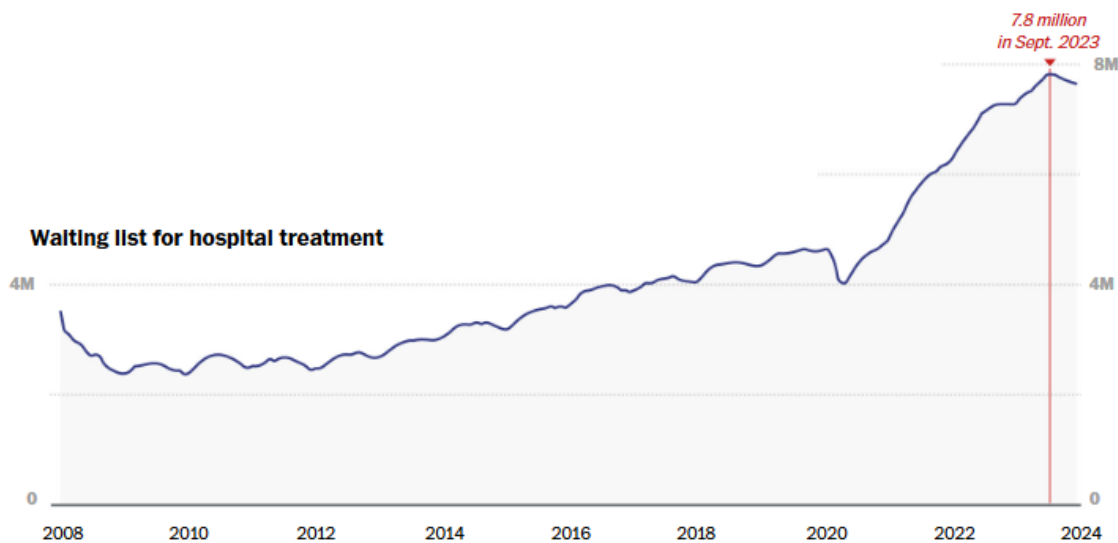
Cameron pushed spending cuts intended to reduce government debt and deficit. The goal was never achieved — public debt this year hit its highest rate as a percentage of economic output since the 1960s — but austerity had many side effects, including huge cuts to local governments that hit services such as schools and swimming pools.

Britain’s beloved National Health Service was one of the few places to see funding rise in real terms during this period, 70 but it mostly failed to match pre-2010 trends, let alone keep up with spiking inflation, immigration and the needs of an aging population. Under the Conservatives, waiting times for treatment have surged.

Britain’s high death rate during the coronavirus pandemic — 20th in the world, according to data from the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine — has been widely attributed to a troubled public health system.

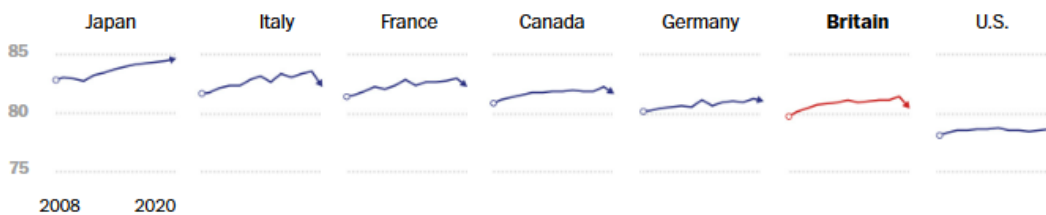
Life expectancy at birth, a key indicator of a country’s health, has stagnated in Britain since 2010, leaving the country 75 sixth in the Group of Seven highly developed nations, ahead of only the United States, long an outlier in health outcomes.

Researchers at the London School of Economics have blamed austerity. They argue that funding constraints not only on the NHS but also welfare and other public services have cost the British nearly half a year of life expectancy.



Source: Britain’s Office for National Statistics

## Life expectancy at birth



Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

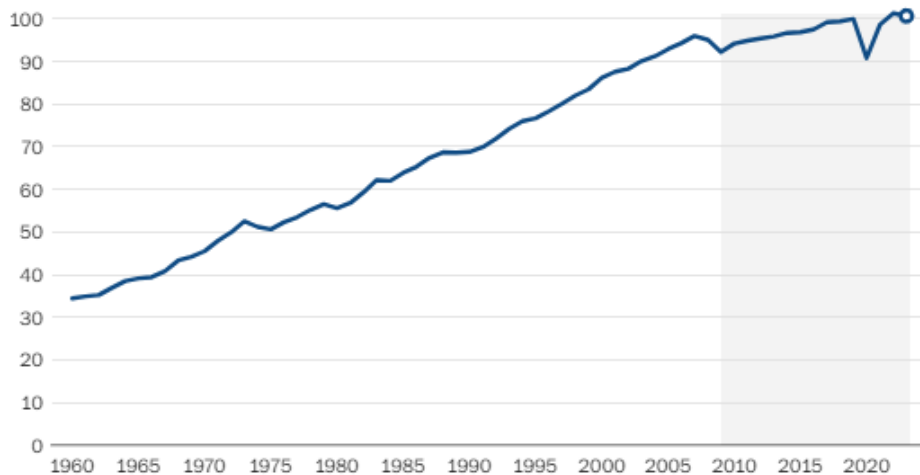
## 80 An unproductive economy

Britain remains one of the world’s largest economies, but its rate of growth has fallen well off its pre-2010 trajectory. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research lays much of the blame on Brexit. By last year, the institute concluded, the departure from the E.U. had already cost the country up to 3 percent of its real gross domestic product, or roughly \$1,000 per person.

85 But a scratch beneath the surface reveals conditions that are still more troubling. Growth in GDP — the country’s total economic output — has been propelled largely by a population boost caused by immigration and demographic shifts.

## Britain's productivity grew rapidly for decades, but has stalled since 2010

Output per hour worked. Index 2019=100



Source: Britain's Office of National Statistics

90 Growth in productivity, measured by economic output per hour worked across the country, has lagged, placing Britain far lower than many of its peers. The slowdown began around Cameron's election 14 years ago.

The Conservative win in 2010 took place just after the global financial crisis shook Britain and many other nations. Some analysts say events for which the government can be blamed, such as Brexit, can't be disentangled from those for which it cannot, including the financial crisis, the pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

95 But whatever the cause, the impacts are real. Wages have remained roughly in line with productivity, resulting in what has been described as the longest period of stagnation in British pay for centuries.

### Green shoots

The Conservatives, known in Britain as the Tories, can claim some successes, including keeping educational 100 achievement at a high international standard and taking a leading role in supporting Ukraine against Russian invaders. But if there's a green shoot to the Tory years, it's that Britain asserted itself as a world leader in the fight against climate change.

Under May, Britain pledged to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions to "net zero" by 2050. Johnson backed a "green 105 industrial revolution." But Sunak tapped the brakes. He delayed by five years a ban on the sale of new gasoline and diesel cars, for example, saying Britain must reduce emissions in a "pragmatic, proportionate and realistic way."

Meanwhile, the use of green energy has exploded. In 2023, renewables — notably, wind, solar, biomass and hydro power — generated 47 percent of the country's electricity.

It's an outcome that belies the political chaos of the period — in 14 years, Britain had 10 environment secretaries.