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### UK politics

# What can we expect from the new prime minister?

**This article should be read alongside 'The UK prime minister' (pp. 20–23).**

Anthony Seldon and Tom Egerton's article argues that the role of prime minister (PM) is not – as is sometimes argued – an impossible task. In fact, they argue that the PM should, and can, be a very powerful figure, unrestrained by a codified constitution and therefore able to have a transformative effect on UK politics. However, they suggest that recent PMs, from Gordon Brown onwards, have not had the required personality and skills, and have generally failed at the task in hand. Will Sir Keir Starmer fare any better in this role?

## Prime ministerial traits

Seldon and Egerton outline some key traits that they believe lead to being a successful PM. Does Keir Starmer appear to have any (or all) of them?

### Experience in office and politics

Starmer has considerable legal experience as a barrister and he was the Director of Public Prosecutions from 2008 to 2013, the third most senior prosecutor in England and Wales. He became an MP in 2015 and was a member of Jeremy Corbyn's shadow cabinet. Starmer was elected as Labour Party leader in 2020. So, although he does not have experience of government, he did have a successful career outside politics, unlike many politicians.

### Achievable and clear agendas

Starmer has been criticised and praised (depending on one's political viewpoint) for lacking an ideological perspective and moving the Labour Party to the centre of UK politics. He is credited with eliminating antisemitism from within the party and leading it to a landslide victory in July 2024. On becoming PM, Starmer said 'the work of change begins immediately'. His aims are economic growth, planning and housing reform, infrastructure improvements, clean energy, improving workers' rights, reform of the NHS and education. Whether or not this is achievable is unclear. The new government will be restricted by its finances and its commitment not to put up taxes in the near future. On his first day as PM, Starmer cancelled the controversial Rwanda scheme for illegal immigrants.

### A sense of moral seriousness

Starmer portrays himself as being a stark contrast to the last three PMs – Sunak, Truss and Johnson. He has been described as dull and uninspiring by some sections of the media, and he is not hugely popular with voters, but he wants to be seen as someone who brings a sense of duty and responsibility to the role of PM. In his victory speech, Starmer pledged to 'end the chaos...start to rebuild our country', promising a 'government of service' and 'calmer waters'. Before the election, he told *The Times* that he wanted to be a 'serious prime minister'.

### Iron will, resilience and a strong work ethic

In his first few days in office, Starmer visited the three devolved nations of the UK, calling for a 'reset' in relations and stressing his commitment to further decentralisation of powers. He also met the English metro mayors, spoke to world leaders and flew to the USA to take part in a NATO summit. This suggests that he is a hard worker. In contrast, during her brief time as PM, Liz Truss failed to contact the then First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. In spite of this, Starmer has made clear his commitment to maintain an active home life, where family commitments will sometimes come first.

### A top team

The new cabinet includes some highly experienced politicians, such as Home Secretary Yvette Cooper and Jacqui Smith, both of whom held positions in Gordon Brown's cabinet. Chancellor Rachel Reeves worked as an economist at the Bank of England and is seen as being a safe pair of hands by the financial markets, as is Foreign Secretary David Lammy. All but one of Starmer's new cabinet have been appointed directly from the shadow cabinet, so they will have prepared thoroughly. Starmer also appointed independent experts, such as new Science Minister Patrick Vallance and Prison Minister James Timpson, to the House of Lords. Chief of Staff is Sue Gray, an experienced senior government official. It will be interesting to see what changes he makes at the first reshuffle.

### Staying power

Starmer is the fifth prime minister since 2019. He will be aiming to have more than one term in office. In order to achieve this, the party will need to balance the need to retain the broad coalition of voters, some of whom they won back from the Tories in 2024, others who could be tempted to vote Green or Liberal Democrat. It can be argued that Starmer has been lucky in benefiting from the collapse of the Tory vote and the impact of Reform UK. To have staying power, he is going to need to work hard.

### Brilliant communication, intellectual ability and ruthless judgement

Starmer is not a particularly brilliant or charismatic communicator, and he does not claim to be so. He has shown some ruthlessness, for example in refusing to allow Jeremy Corbyn to return to the Labour Party, and by appointing Richard Hermer KC as Attorney General, rather than Shadow Minister Emily Thornbury. He was also happy to abandon many of the more socialist commitments made in his 2019 leadership campaign.

## Conclusion

It is much too early to judge whether or not Starmer will be a more effective prime minister than the other recent residents of 10 Downing Street. With serious economic constraints, and without the high personal popularity ratings of Blair or Johnson, it will be a difficult task.

### Student task

This article was written in July 2024. What has changed since then? Update each section.

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