



British opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer attends a Labour general election campaign event at Hitchin Town Football Club in Hitchin, Britain, on July 1, 2024.  
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Liberal Democrat leader Sir Ed Davey (front-left) is greeted by Tory "dinosaurs" as he unveils a banner and joins local Lib Dem campaigners at a celebratory rally in Winchester, following the results in local government elections.  
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### The aftermath

To some extent, Sunak's biggest crime is simply to be in office during a widespread anti-incumbent trend throughout the Western democratic world. He's deeply unpopular but not significantly more so than G7 counterparts like France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Olaf Scholz. Defenders of the Conservatives' time in office will point to the external shocks the party had to contend with, including the legacy of the 2008 financial crisis, the Covid pandemic, and the economic impact of the war in Ukraine. But every major economy had to deal with those shocks. Only one country — and one

party — chose Brexit.

Disentangling the effects of the withdrawal from other post-2020 shocks isn't easy, but a recent study from Britain's National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR), an independent think tank, estimated that the UK's real GDP is about two to three percent lower today, compared to a scenario where it stayed in the union. Real income is about eight to nine percent lower.

According to the government's own figures, Britain's GDP today is only about 1.7 percent higher than it was pre-pandemic, compared to 3.7 percent for the Eurozone and 8.7 percent for the United States.

Ironically, Brexit didn't even accomplish the goal that motivated many of its supporters to vote for it: Net migration to the UK has actually increased since the withdrawal. Much of the debate around immigration policy has focused on the government's bizarre and inhumane plan to fly asylum seekers to Rwanda to have their claims processed, as a means of deterring them from trying. But asylum seekers are only about 11 percent of the UK's immigrants, and half of those are Ukrainians who entered under a specially tailored system and significantly more public support.

The real driver of migration is economic — including the economic

needs of Britain itself. As migration researcher Hein de Haas has written, while "Brexit successfully curtailed free inflows of EU workers, it did not eliminate labor shortages that had been driving increasing migration to the UK ever since the 1990s." Some jobs staffing Britain's stores and its much-beloved National Health Service have been filled by non-EU migrants instead of European ones; some European migrants who previously traveled back and forth between the UK and the continent have stayed put.

Brexit's advocates had argued that the benefits of trade with Europe could be offset by a free trade agreement that a new "global

Britain," unshackled from the EU, could pursue. But other than new deals with Australia and New Zealand, progress has been slow on that front. Johnson and Truss both promised a new free trade deal with the United States as a benefit of Brexit but badly misjudged the changing mood in Washington, where both the Republicans and Democrats have taken a turn toward protectionism. (Credit where it's due: Johnson did get the US to lift a ban on the imports of British lamb.) More than 60 percent of British voters, including more than a third of "Leave" voters, now say Brexit has been more of a failure than a success. But the damage is done.

### Not-so-global Britain

The reality is that far from broadening Britain's horizons, Brexit has forced it to confront what it really is: a mid-sized country with a mid-sized economy that has a mid-sized influence on the world.

Asked what role foreign policy and national security have played in this election, Nick Witney, a former British diplomat and defense official now with the European Council on Foreign Relations, told Vox, "Not much because we don't have much of a foreign or defense policy at the moment. And there's going to be no money available to buy ourselves one for a number of years under new government."

Indeed, for all Johnson's talk of a "global Britain" recovering its "buccaneering" spirit, the UK cuts a more modest profile on the world stage today than it did when Conservatives took over. London has cut funding to the foreign office, foreign aid, and one of the country's most significant soft power assets: the BBC. Defense spending has increased since Russian President Vladimir

Putin's assault on Ukraine, but the size of the military in terms of manpower has shrunk. A last-ditch campaign proposal by Sunak to mandate national service for 18-year-olds did not go over well.

"No one talks about 'global Britain' anymore," said Witney. "It's extraordinary how our horizons have shrunk. If you go back 20 years, there was practically not a sparrow that fell anywhere around the globe where the British didn't feel they would have something to say about it. Nowadays, we are an impoverished and ultimately less ambitious country."

One very notable exception has been the war in Ukraine, where the UK has been a significant provider of military aid, training, and economic support — often taking a more aggressive stance than the US on providing new weapons systems and capabilities to the Ukrainians. Johnson may be persona non grata in British politics right now, but there are streets named after him in Ukraine.

### What's next?

Probably due in part to the fact that the result hasn't really been in doubt, the election itself has been heavily dominated by gaffes and scandals, including Sunak's ill-advised decision to leave D-Day commemorations in France early and the revelations that candidates in both parties have been betting on the election.

It's also true that compared to figures like Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, or even David Cameron — all of whom came into power in landscape-shifting change elections — current Labour leader Keir Starmer isn't exactly promising radical change. Starmer has managed to stabilize his party after the politically disastrous Corbyn years, and — perhaps not surprisingly given that he entered the race with a huge lead — has run on a relatively modest policy platform. It's too modest for some allies, who accuse him of "limping into No. 10," while the party has also angered progressives by barring several left-wing candidates, including two women of color, in the run-up to the election. Though the party opposed Brex-

it during the referendum, Labour does not plan to try to rejoin the European Union. Ahmet Kaya, an economist with the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, told Vox that wouldn't really be practical in the near term anyway, and that the focus should be on negotiations with Europe aimed at "reducing the barriers on trade and facilitating some of the free movement of people," particularly students. Steps like these, he said, could "reduce the overall negative impact of Brexit."

There won't be a huge shift in foreign policy either. Unlike in the US, support for Ukraine is pretty bipartisan in the UK. In the wake of the poisoning of a former Russian spy and his daughter on British soil in 2018 as well a flurry of coverage of how Russian oligarchs have manipulated the British financial system, there's little pro-Russian sympathy in the UK, though Farage recently caused a media uproar with remarks suggesting NATO was partly to blame for the war in Ukraine. Starmer has also taken some criticism from Muslim Labour supporters over being slow to call for a ceasefire in Gaza.

This hasn't mattered much for his election chances, but his choices on this and other contentious issues are going to get a lot tougher when he's actually in power.

Above all else, Starmer will face the challenge of overcoming the perceptions built up during the past decade. "Brexit has kind of defined how the UK is perceived internationally by many of our partners," Evie Aspinall, director of the British Foreign Policy Group, told Vox. "We're seen as a more isolated nation than we were prior to Brexit." There are some parallels here with the Biden administration, which came into office promising allies that "America is back" following the isolation of the Trump years. As with the Democrats in 2020, Labour has gone with a broadly popular — if somewhat dull — candidate, whose promise is that he can turn down the political temperature after a period of chaos and upheaval. It may not be enough to get them another 13- or 14-year stint in power, but it's almost certainly enough to turn the page on July 4.

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