

Labour In Downing Street

A Review Of Domestic And Foreign Policy

by Prof Melanie Sully



This ABS Blog article is based on a lecture by Prof Dr Melanie Sully for the Austrian Society for Foreign Policy and the United Nations (ÖGVAN), Vienna Hofburg, November 2024

It is not necessary to recall the results of the election on July 4, 2024 which produced a Labour landslide on around a third of the popular vote but delivered a handsome majority in the House of Commons. It was one of the most disproportional results in the UK's history, even given the nature of the electoral system. (For more see the issue of "Zeitschrift für Parlamentsfragen" 3, 2024, www.zparl.de where I published an article).

No sooner had Labour entered Downing St than the country faced widespread rioting following the stabbings of children at a dance club. Misinformation on social media fuelled rumours of the motives and riots broke out in other major cities. The new Prime Minister Keir Starmer managed to get the situation under control with a 'name and shame' policy. Rioters were quickly brought to justice and photos posted in the media. Whilst this had the effect of quelling the riots, it did little to ascertain the underlying causes. Also as prisons are full it led to an early release programme which did not go down well with voters.

A controversial point was the abolition of the winter fuel allowance for millions of pensioners without consultation, a policy that was not in the election manifesto. The Labour Party Conference in the Autumn voted this down signifying discontent amongst the rank and file.

A refrain of the Labour Government so far has been to repeat it has inherited a 14-year Tory mess. Thus to its surprise a huge black hole was discovered in the budget leading to a decision to spend more, tax more and borrow more. Infrastructure projects will get more cash as will the NHS but it is not clear what reforms will be introduced if any. Economic growth is the lynchpin of the Government's platform but with a new President in the White House, this may not come to fruition. If in four or five years' time, voters fail to see any improvement in their day-to-day lives they may well turn their backs on Labour.

Foreign Policy And Migration Issues

As to foreign policy, it was noted that the Prime Minister has spent rather a lot of time out of the country. He has been keen to reset relations with the EU although at this stage it is not clear what this could entail. Better trade relations would presume access to the single market and freedom of movement, ruled out by Labour before the election. A youth mobility scheme is on the cards but would be asymmetrical for the UK unless it was bilateral.

Relations with some Commonwealth members continue to be tense with the issue of reparations unsolved. Non-financial deals could be offered but this would probably not go far enough for those seeking compensation.

Then reference was made to the little known Chagos Islands, a UK-US military base, in the Indian Ocean which the government has agreed to return to Mauritius, an ally of India but with good trading relations with China. Although the Biden administration was in favour of this move, some Republicans were wary of giving China a possible stepping stone to Africa.

Migration continues to be a problem for the UK government which has pledged to smash the smuggler gangs bringing people across the Channel. With the Rwanda plan ditched Starmer has to show results on this but it will be difficult to haul the ringleaders based outside the country before UK courts. The European Convention on Human Rights is another stumbling block, anchored in UK law and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the EU. With other European countries facing similar problems on migration, some concerted effort may materialise on a returns policy. Domestic politics in France and Germany though could mean progress is slow. Meanwhile hotels are still being used to host migrants often to the chagrin of local residents. Nigel Farage, newly elected MP, can continue to capitalise on this point.

I have to conclude by pointing out some weaknesses in the Labour Party's communications. A reported power struggle in Downing St meant that negative media coverage of free gifts given to Labour grandees dragged on all Summer. Free concert and sporting events tickets as well as free clothes and spectacles financed by a wealthy donor have raised some eyebrows. Starmer had promised to adopt a more ethical approach in government. Arguably such gifts can entrench the loss of trust in politicians to represent ordinary people.

The ABS is looking forward to receiving your views and comments!



About the author

Melanie Sully (Prof. Dr.) is a Board Member of the Austro-British Society, editor, writer and consultant, who was for many years professor of political science at the Diplomatic Academy, Vienna. Formerly Voice of America radio correspondent, Dr. Sully acts as a consultant on good governance projects for the Cultural Department of the Federal Ministry for European and International Affairs, Austria. Further she has worked as a consultant for the OSCE on projects such as parliamentary standards, comparative legislatures, as well as women's political participation. She gave presentations on parliaments and ethics and legislative standards for parliamentarians in Tbilisi and for the Council of Europe, gave Guest Professorial Lecture, for politics at the University of London, and has given expert evidence to the House of Commons.

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