

The PM's handling of world affairs has given his image a boost – but can it last?

# Starmer's had a glimpse of foreign sunshine amid the domestic gloom – yet his fate is hanging on what happens at home



By **LORD ASHCROFT**

FORMER TORY PARTY DEPUTY CHAIRMAN

**I**T HAD to happen sooner or later – a good few weeks for Sir Keir Starmer. After an unhappy start in Downing Street, a view is gaining ground that the Prime Minister has finally found his feet. It is an opinion that many voters share, whatever their party.

Starmer's adept handling of his White House meeting with President Trump, combined with his strong backing for Ukraine and rallying of European leaders, finally gave Labour supporters something to cheer about ('He seemed to come alive,' as one put it in my recent research). Even his opponents concede that Starmer may have his uses after all.

The squabbling at the other end of the political spectrum has given the PM a further boost.

The falling-out between Nigel Farage and Rupert Lowe, and the resulting expulsion of one-fifth of Reform UK's parliamentary party, put the Government's noisiest opponents on the back foot.

Though the intricacies of the schism will have passed most normal voters by, I found that Lowe's characterisation of Reform as 'a protest party led by the Messiah' is widely shared. Even among those currently leaning towards voting Reform, only just over half currently see it as a serious party of government.

The upshot is that Starmer has strengthened his lead as the best available prime minister over both Farage and Kemi Badenoch.

As the parties gear up for the local election campaign, fewer than half of Conservative leaners see her as the best PM (indeed, Labour supporters are twice as likely to choose Starmer over Badenoch as Tories are to choose Badenoch over Starmer), and the number falls further when Farage is added into the equation.

The Conservatives have 'gone into the woodwork', voters often tell me, whether because they are still winded from the scale of their defeat or plotting fiendishly behind the scenes.

We will see whether the party's newly launched policy review, together with its bold move away from the net zero agenda, have the effect of at least bringing the Tories back into the conversation.

How long Starmer's unaccustomed streak of good fortune will last is another question.

World affairs can dominate a premiership and sometimes help to end it, but rarely bring electoral rewards.

Gordon Brown was in his ele-

ment corralling fellow leaders after the 2008 financial crisis, for all the good it did him at the following election.

**T**HE ultimate example is Winston Churchill, sent packing by the voters in 1945 despite saving the nation from the Nazis.

Like all prime ministers, Starmer's fate will depend on what happens at home.

Here he is on much rockier ground. 'The only people they haven't wound up are the junior doc-

tors and the train drivers,' one 2024 Labour voter told me last week, reflecting on the Government's record since July, which is dominated in the public memory by cuts to the winter fuel allowance and a string of tax rises.

The perception of a two-tier justice system, another regular theme for complaints, seemed to be confirmed by the Sentencing Council's recent proposal that judges should consider whether a defendant is part of an ethnic, religious or cultural minority when sentencing. My focus groups sug-

gest the guidance is every bit as unpopular as it deserves to be, and the argument that the body is independent from government gets short shrift from voters.

For one thing, it sounds to many like exactly the kind of thing that lawyerly Labour types would come up with. For another, they say, the Government are in charge, and if they really don't like it, they should change it.

In the coming weeks, Starmer faces two further tests that will help define his leadership. The proposed welfare reforms are

the most immediate and, for Labour, likely to be the most painful. Broadly, public opinion is on the Government's side. Most voters agree that reforming the benefits system to control costs and get people back to work if they are able is the right thing to do, and they are twice as likely to think it is too easy to claim benefits as to think it's too hard. Uncomfortably for ministers, Conservative and Reform-leaning voters back the intention in greater numbers than Labour's core supporters.

Like crime and policing, welfare has always been tricky territory for Labour. My poll found that while the Tories are the party most associated with well-off people, Labour are seen as the closest to those who work hard and just about manage – but also to someone who would rather live on benefits than go to work.

I also found that most of those who support welfare reform doubt that Labour will go through with it – an impression surely reinforced by the climbdown over the proposed freezing of Personal Independence Payments after threats of revolt from Labour MPs.

**F**URTHER rebellion is brewing. Whether Starmer uses his huge majority to push through the right (and, for a change, popular) course of action, or caves in to the most Left-wing elements of his party, will tell us a lot about both Labour and its leader.

The other big moment is the Chancellor's Spring Statement on Wednesday. To the astonishment of nobody except Rachel Reeves, the £40billion tax hike in her autumn budget damaged jobs and growth, meaning further action is needed to balance the books.

I found that while voters would prefer her to do so by reining in spending than raising taxes still further, they are much more likely to think yet another tax raid is on the cards.

How Sir Keir Starmer handles these challenges, and the upheavals that follow, will help determine whether the last month is remembered as a turning point in his tenure or a glimpse of foreign sunshine amid the domestic gloom.

● Lord Ashcroft is a businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. His research is at [LordAshcroftPolls.com](http://LordAshcroftPolls.com). X/Facebook @LordAshcroft

## WHO AM I?

- I was in a breakdancing crew called The Bronx Breakers.
- I have a fairy cake tattoo.
- I'm dyslexic, so my wife has to read scripts for me to help decide whether to accept a role.
- I've a reputation for playing troubled hardmen. Leonardo DiCaprio, right, nicknamed me 'Animal', but in real life I'm teetotal and a fan of meditation.
- I cost my nephew's football club a £190 fine after verbally abusing a referee at a match in December.
- My show *Adolescence* tops the Netflix viewing chart.

## Who? What? Where?

OUR fun weekly quiz, in which we ask you to figure out people, places and things in the news...

## WHAT AM I?

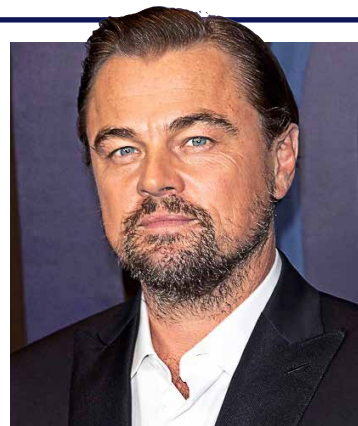
- I might have wiped out the woolly mammoths.
- The first person to describe

me tried treating me with opium and toxic mercury. Doctors later suggested smoking might alleviate symptoms – it won't!

- Having multiple siblings decreases the risk of having me.
- I was once thought to affect mainly the educated upper-classes.
- Driving while suffering from me is as dangerous as drink-driving, scientists found.
- My common name has nothing to do with what causes me.

## WHERE AM I?

- I was first built in 1129 by



Henry I, and lions and camels used to roam my grounds.

- I was given to a military leader by Queen Anne as a

thank you for defeating the French. But there is rent: each year his descendants must present a replica of the captured French standard to the monarch at Windsor Castle, or else I revert to the Crown.

- I've made 71 TV and film appearances – more than any other stately home.
- Winston Churchill was born here.
- Last week, two men were convicted over the theft of a £4.75million gold toilet from here.

ANSWERS: Stephen Graham, hay fever, Blenheim Palace.

STEVE BENNETT



# Six months to save

## Rattled Labour MPs issue warning to the Chancellor as she plans controversial £15billion cutbacks

RACHEL Reeves has been warned that she has six months to save her job, as Labour MPs grow increasingly restive over her plan to slash state spending by £15billion.

The Chancellor is expected to announce deeper than expected cuts in her Spring Statement on Wednesday after she was forced to borrow an extra £20billion over the first 11 months of the fiscal year – the result of inflation-busting pay rises for the public sector and spiralling welfare payments.

Senior party sources say that if the economy has not sparked into life by the time of the Autumn Budget, Ms Reeves will have ‘run out of road’.

The Chancellor expected the economy to be in ‘credit’ by £10billion at this point – her so-called ‘fiscal headroom’ – but flatlining growth means that the Treasury is closer to £5billion in debt, necessitating at least £15billion in cuts in order to return to her target.

The fiscal rules state day-to-day government spending must be paid for out of taxation, not borrowing, and stipulate debt must fall as a share of national income by the end of this Parliament.

But her £25 billion Budget raid on employers’ National Insurance last year hit business confidence and strangled growth, causing government borrowing costs to soar.

A source said: ‘If we continue on this trajectory she will have three options to avoid a Liz Truss-style

By **Glen Owen** and **Patrick Tooher**

market turmoil – cut spending further, raise taxes or fiddle her fiscal rules to appear solvent. None of those will be politically acceptable and she will be at the end of the road.’

Defence expenditure has already been boosted by cutting the foreign aid budgets, while a £5billion cut to benefits was announced just last week.

In an article for today’s Mail on Sunday, the Chancellor pledges

‘Growth is down, inflation is up’

to keep ‘an iron grip on the country’s finances’.

She writes: ‘Stability must come first. And on that bedrock of stability, we will get our economy growing.’

Ms Reeves, who said yesterday that ‘we can’t tax and spend our way to higher living standards and better public services’, is nervous about her assault on public services being compared to the ‘austerity’ of former Tory chancellor George Osborne.

The Office for Budget Responsibility is expected to halve its growth forecast for 2025 to around 1 per cent, piling more pressure on



her to raise taxes again later this year to meet the fiscal rules.

The Treasury is searching for savings in addition to those from aid and welfare by targeting ‘unprotected’ spending departments such as the Home Office, Justice, Environment and local government.

The recent decision to abolish the NHS England quango could net another billion, while making more public services digital and reforming the civil service may yield another £3billion and £2bil-

lion respectively. Polling for today’s MoS shows that voters think Ms Reeves should cut spending rather than increase taxes.

Just 18 per cent want to see an increase in taxes, compared with the 40 per cent for cutting spending and 11 per cent who think public borrowing should be increased. However, 46 per cent expect that she will increase taxes, while 26 per cent say she will slash spending.

Yesterday, Labour’s Lord Blunkett urged Reeves to ‘loosen a little the self-imposed fiscal rules’,

calling them ‘Treasury orthodoxy and monetarism at its worst’.

Shadow chancellor Mel Stride said: ‘The Labour Chancellor promised “growth, growth, growth” but since the Budget, growth is down, inflation is up, and business confidence has collapsed.

‘Labour are having to come forward with an emergency Budget on Wednesday – a situation entirely of their own making. Rachel Reeves must urgently rethink her anti-business Budget.’

Dan Hodges – Page 37

### IS IT TOO EASY TO APPLY FOR BENEFITS?

Yes	39%
No	18%

### SHOULD THE BENEFITS SYSTEM BE REFORMED TO CUT COSTS?

Yes	62%
No	22%

### WHAT SHOULD RACHEL REEVES DO TO BALANCE THE BOOKS?

Increase taxes	18%
Cut spending	40%
Increase borrowing	11%

### BEST PRIME MINISTER

Sir Keir Starmer	34%
Kemi Badenoch	14%

### SHOULD THE UK IMPOSE TARIFFS ON AMERICA?

Yes	42%
No	27%

### WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT STARMER’S APPROACH TO TRUMP?

The PM should be more critical	38%
The PM should be more supportive	9%

### IS THE KING RIGHT TO BE SUPPORTIVE OF CANADA IN ITS BATTLE WITH TRUMP?

Yes	71%
No	15%

### SHOULD THE UK PROVIDE TROOPS FOR A PEACEKEEPING FORCE IN UKRAINE?

Yes	55%
No	30%

### WHAT IS YOUR VIEW OF NIGEL FARAGE?

He just wants to get publicity and cause trouble	47%
He wants to get into Government and change things	22%

By **Glen Owen**

POLITICAL EDITOR

THE public are clear what they want to hear when Rachel Reeves makes her Spring Statement on Wednesday – no more tax rises.

Last year’s £25billion hike in employers’ National Insurance payments has stifled economic confidence, and the electorate hope that is the end of the rises.

Exclusive research, by Tory former deputy chairman Lord Ashcroft and shared with The Mail on Sunday, shows that just 18 per cent of people want an increase in taxes.

Forty per cent back cutting spending and 11 per cent think public borrowing should rise.

But 46 per cent expect Ms Reeves will increase taxes,

## Voters are – but fear

while 26 per cent say she will slash spending.

Reforms to the benefits system are welcomed by most of those surveyed, with 62 per cent agreeing that welfare should be amended to cut costs.

Last week Work and Pensions Secretary Liz Kendall unveiled changes aimed at saving £5billion a year by 2030 and creating a ‘pro-work system’.

The survey shows that 39 per cent think it is too easy for people to apply for benefits. Just 18 per cent say it is not. The poll



# your job, Rachel...

## FUNNY, MS REEVES



**THROWING IN THE TROWEL:** A laughing Rachel Reeves tries her hand at bricklaying at Bury College, near Manchester, last week

## behind benefit cuts spectre of tax hikes

also reveals that Sir Keir Starmer's recent adventures on the world stage have arrested his plunge in the polls.

He is the best Prime Minister for 34 per cent of voters, compared to just 14 per cent for Tory Kemi Badenoch.

Sir Keir has extended his lead over Ms Badenoch from 12 to 20 points since meeting Donald Trump and rallying European leaders behind Ukraine.

The PM has also benefited from Reform UK feuding which pitted leader Nigel Farage against MP

Rupert Lowe. Asked their view of Mr Farage, more than twice as many people think 'he just wants to get publicity and cause trouble' as think he 'wants to get into government and change things'.

The King receives strong backing over his support for Canada in its diplomatic battle with Mr Trump. Seventy-one per cent told researchers he was right to do so.

A total of 5,111 people were polled between March 13 and 17.

*Can Starmer's image boost last? Lord Ashcroft: Page 32*

**T**HE world is changing in front of us and The Mail on Sunday readers can see it. Vladimir Putin represents a serious threat to our national security. Global uncertainty is pushing up borrowing and European countries are having to spend more on defence.

Britain is a strong country. I know we can overcome the challenges we face but we need a government that responds to the changing world. A government that will usher in a new era of security, stability and renewal.

We've all seen what happens when you have a government that chooses instability over security. Higher bills, higher rents, higher mortgage rates – and normal working people paying the price.

A price they're still paying for the damage the Conservatives did to our country's sound reputation for managing the public finances.

That's why the first line of our manifesto was to restore economic stability.

People up and down the country put their trust in us because they knew we would never play fast and loose with the public purse. They trusted

***'I make no apology for keeping an iron grip on finances'***

that we wouldn't put their household finances at risk.

That trust was rightly hard-fought and must be earned every single day.

I make no apology for keeping an iron grip on the country's finances. There is nothing Labour about working people paying the price of economic irresponsibility.

Stability must come first. And on that bedrock of stability, we will get our economy growing.

It won't be easy. It will require us to do things differently, like taking on the blockers and slashing the red tape that has had a stranglehold on our economy.

We are already reforming the planning rules – left to fester for years – to build the 1.5 million homes we desperately need. We're fast-tracking 150 major infrastructure projects and investing in our roads, rail and energy infrastructure to unlock private investment.

But none of this is possible

# We've been trapped in a spiral of decline for far too long

By **RACHEL REEVES**

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER

without the engineers, brickies, sparkies and chippies to get the work done, and we are facing a massive shortage.

We need tens of thousands of skilled construction workers to get this country building again and deliver our target of 1.5 million homes by 2029.

To make matters worse there are more than 35,000 job vacancies, over half of which can't be filled because of a lack of required skills – the highest rate of any sector.

Just as we got into the weeds of a broken planning system that is holding this country back, now we are going to crack the lack of skilled construction workers as well.

We need to inspire the next generation in Britain to take these well-paid jobs that offer a career for life while helping to build millions of homes to transform communities and provide security for families up and down the country. By investing more than £600million over this Parliament we will train up to 60,000 more construction workers.

And we need the best in the business, the men and women who have spent decades working on building sites, to pass on their skills to the next generation of construction workers. That is why we are launching a new Further Education Teacher Industry Exchange scheme to get industry experts upskilling the next generation, as well as boosting funding for training providers.

And our plan will deliver additional industry placements, establish Technical Excellence Colleges specialising in construction, launch new foundation apprenticeships and expand Skills Bootcamps to boost construction and drive economic growth.

It's a plan that will unleash the new generation of British construction workers, building the houses and infrastructure we need, getting Britain building again.

For too long, we have been trapped in a spiral of decline: low growth and low wages, insecure work, rising bills, soaring immigration and a

***'We'll invest £600million to train 60,000 more building workers'***

soaring welfare bill. Too many people feel left out from or forgotten by the system.

And the prize on offer is an economy that is more productive, more energetic, and capable of delivering on the priorities of the British people.

Because it's only by securing that economy of the future that we can deliver on our Plan for Change – and put security in people's lives and start a new chapter of national renewal.