

# Sunak and Starmer: the two sides of failing first-part-...

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I commented on Keir Starmer's 'vision' speech a number of times yesterday, mainly by reproducing tweets I had posted during and after its delivery. The morning after most events is always a good time for reflection though, and this time there are two speeches to consider (Sunak tried to steal Starmer's thunder the day before) and so let me muse on where we are.

The bottom line is we are in a bad place where the two leading politicians in the UK are both playing to politically ill-informed audiences who will, they think, determine their fates, largely on the basis of prejudice instead of informed opinion.

As a result unfounded fears on migration (Sunak) and the level of government spending (Starmer) were highlighted. The debt card was played heavily by both as if the country as whole really is being burdened by people choosing to save with the government, when that is clearly not the case.

And both made meaningless promises. Sunak promised growth that is not going to happen, and an end to small boat crossings, which is a promise beyond his control. Starmer, ludicrously, offered local control of much of the economy without explain how existing structures that might appear local but which currently deny any such accountability (from NHS Trusts, to academy schools, to privatised train, bus and water companies as well as housing associations) were going to be swept away to make this local control possible, and all without any extra money.

The surreal similarity between the two was more apparent than the differences. Both claimed to know people's priorities. Then they declared what they were without consultation having apparently taken place. After that they selected fantastic (in the literal sense) goals that supposedly reflected those desires that will in all likelihood not be achieved, and would change little if they were, although overall Sunak probably did better on choosing, excepting the fact he can't deliver. Starmer failed because I know of literally no one in England who thinks their life will be made better by more local control of services, and he utterly ignored the issue of independence for Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

The only possible conclusion is that we now have major party leaders who share in common a deep attachment to austerity, because neither is willing to spend any additional government money; who think lowering inflation requires any sacrifice that bankers demand; and who offer promises that are in themselves meaningless that cannot in any meaningful way change the wellbeing of people, on which they refuse to spend more.

Both believe government must be run like households. Neither has the slightest grasp of macroeconomics that any good prime minister must possess. And neither is willing to mention the biggest issues the country faces (what the country is; EU relations; Northern Ireland; inflation matching pay rises to prevent recession; the overwhelming need to address climate change as a priority of greater significance than growth; the unaffordability of housing; crushing inequality; the gross injustice of student debt; electoral reform; the cost of childcare; the social care crisis and so much more).

In summary, we have politicians who lack vision, and offer fantasies instead of real answers. Both remain wedded to political ideas decades out of date (neoliberal fantasies of market supremacy and the importance of choice). Neither acknowledges, let alone addresses, the real issues we face.

Meanwhile, the country is sinking as a result of Tory failure (Starmer had, at least, got that right). Sunak can only offer more of the same. Starmer, not knowing what to do, is seeking to pass the buck from Westminster to whomsoever he can pass it too, proving he truly is one of the cowardly politicians I described in my 2011 book 'The Courageous State'.

What we can conclude is that at present neither of these political parties has any of the required answers to the problems that we face whilst first past the post, to which they unsurprisingly cling, makes any alternative hard to deliver. And do not doubt the significance of first-past-the-post. Given that it guarantees each will get a turn in the end it removes the need to ever be good, let alone relevant: waiting is enough to eventually win power in this system, and it shows.

I can't see comfortable solutions to this situation. Equally, I cannot see the current status quo as sustainable. The anger is growing. All told, we live in deeply uncomfortable times, knowing that the politics that these two hopeless leaders espouse must pass, but without knowing as yet from where the alternative might come, or how it might be delivered.