

Reeves tries to sugarcoat austerity as UK Labour's support plummets

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Ahead of Chancellor Rachel Reeves's speech to the Labour Party conference, concern had been rising in ruling circles about the government being too blunt in setting out its agenda of savage attacks on the working class.

"Labour should ditch doom and gloom message for one of economic renewal," advised the *Guardian's* economics correspondent Richard Partington. "Starmer and Reeves must articulate the government's purpose," wrote John McTernan for the *Financial Times*, adding in the same article, "Where's the hope?"

As McTernan explains, Labour's approach has been to argue "'things will get worse before they get better', which is heard by voters as things will definitely get worse—they have a proof point of that in the treatment of pensioners.'

This refers to the stringent means testing of fuel allowance, leaving millions of poor elderly people facing crippling costs or a winter without heating. In a sign of the fury at this measure in the working class, even Labour conference delegates audibly booed a decision to postpone a vote on the matter forced on the leadership, until Wednesday.

The fuel cut followed a refusal to scrap the vicious two-child cap on benefits payments.

All of which has been followed by a spree of revelations that Starmer, his deputy Angela Rayner and Reeves have had rather more to be hopeful about in recent years thanks to donations from wealthy backers. Just one, multimillionaire Lord Waheed Alli, has outfitted the trio (plus Starmer's wife) to the tune of nearly £30,000 spent on clothes, with £2,435 going on pairs of glasses for Starmer—apparently still not enough to help him see how bad this might look.

The Labour leader has also received £35,000 in football tickets and hospitality, plus £4,000 of

hospitality at a Taylor Swift concert. Rayner has hired her own personal photographer for £68,000 of taxpayers' money a year.

None of which was helped by Lisa Nandy, the culture secretary, telling the media the Labour ministers would now stop accepting thousands of pounds of clothing freebies because "we don't want people to believe that we are living very different lives from them."

The result is one of the worst sets of polling numbers for a new government in British history. According to Ipsos, just 22 percent of people are "pleased" with Labour's performance, and fewer than half of Labour voters—a fifth of whom regret voting for the party. Only a third of people think it is doing a better job than the Conservative government it replaced.

Starmer is the least popular at this early stage in his premiership of any of his predecessors back at least to David Cameron—with the exception of the unrivalled disaster Liz Truss—with just a quarter of people telling pollster Ipsos they felt he was doing a good job. Notably, Cameron's ultimately fell lower, but after the brutal 2012 austerity budget; Reeves is due to reveal Labour's first budget at the end of October.

A more recent Opinion poll records a 45-point plunge in Starmer's personal approval rating (the percent who approve minus the percent who disapprove) since July 19. It now stands at -26 percent. Reeves has fallen 36 points to roughly the same level.

This comes after an election which put Labour into power with just a third of ballots cast and the lowest share of eligible voters in post-war British history.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in the aftermath of the vote: "Sir Keir Starmer takes his place at the head of a Labour government on a collision course with the British working class... The question many workers and young people around the country

will be asking themselves, just a couple of days after handing Rishi Sunak's Tories an unprecedented electoral defeat, is: 'How do we get rid of their replacements?'"

Alluding to this well of social anger, the *Guardian*'s deputy political editor Jessica Elgot cautioned last week that people had "voted for political change and improved public services," referring to calls for "hopefulness." McTernan wrote similarly that "Labour's mandate at the election was to rebuild public services, not to rebuild the public finances at any cost" and asked for a vision of "what a better future would look like."

Reeves, however, made only the slightest change of rhetorical tack on Monday, writing in the *Times* that "I have never been more optimistic about our country's fortunes," a line made the basis of the paper's flattering front-page story on Monday, "Good times ahead if we seize them, insists Reeves."

Labour's commitment to "investor sentiment," "governing as a pro-business party" and "economic stability and getting a grip of the public finances", as Reeves reiterated in the same piece, means it cannot refrain from attacking any hint of social reform or threatening the working class for more than a few sentences. "We cannot tax and spend our way to prosperity," warned the chancellor, and, "None of this will come easy."

It was the same story with her conference speech, which combined sorrowful headshaking over the "need" to make cuts alongside her headline promise of "no return to austerity." This was paired with further commitments to "economic and fiscal responsibility" and her pledge that big business profits would not be touched.

The ubiquitous reference to the "£22 billion black hole" left in the state finances by the Tory Party got an early mention, with Reeves declaring "the money was not there." Labour had been forced to take action to make "the savings necessary." Cutting winter fuel allowance was "the right decision in the circumstances that we inherited," she declared, while complaining the triple lock would see the state pension rise a measly £1,700 over the length of the parliament. She would make "hard choices" again.

Earlier that day, Reeves refused to confirm that her promised "no return to austerity" would exempt

government departments from real-terms cuts, telling reporters, "the detailed department by department spending will be negotiated." Overall, she claimed, "There will be real-terms increases to government spending in this parliament"—justifying swingeing cuts today with promises of "jam tomorrow."

The chancellor's most significant effort to win some popular appeal was based on a promise to "make work pay." She was "proud to stand here as the first chancellor in 14 years to have delivered a meaningful, real pay rise to millions of public sector workers."

While this was enough for the *Guardian* to hail "an address full of passion and grit, something genuinely stirring," NHS workers delivered their own verdict within the hour as two-thirds of a record 145,000 voting nurses rejected Reeves's pathetic 5.5 percent pay award—a tiny fraction of the real-terms collapse in pay over recent years. Hundreds of thousands of teachers represented by the National Education Union will deliver their verdict on the same offer in a week's time—exactly one month before the Autumn budget.

Just minutes into Reeves' speech, protesters loudly heckled from the audience, with one yelling out, "We are still selling arms to Israel, I thought we voted for change Rachel, climate breakdown is on our doorstep." Others could be heard shouting "Free Palestine!" Two of the young hecklers were dragged violently from the conference venue, one grabbed round the neck, the other youth slammed into a wall.

Defence Secretary John Healey, addressing conference earlier that morning, made clear there would be no let-up in military operations in support of Israel or for NATO's escalating war against Russia: "We will set out a path to increase defence spending to 2.5 per cent of GDP, a level not matched since 2010 when Labour was last in government."



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