

# The Article

## How Keir Starmer forgot the outside world 17.12.24



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Sir Keir Starmer elected as the new prime minister arrives at Downing Street. (Shutterstock)

here must have been a mistake. In the rush, and with the impossible burden of office, and the exhausting pattern of his actual travels, the PM must have missed it in the pile in his red box, or just not have had time to more than glance at it.

I am referring to the Prime Minister’s “Plan for Change”, his mission-led priorities, his views about our nation and its future and its milestone-marked pathway to the “certainty of a clear destination”.

Except for a couple of passing references to Putin’s vicious invasion of Ukraine, and the need to work with international partners, there is nothing in this document, nothing of the slightest depth or worth, about the turbulent wider world and its impact upon us.

For it is events in the wider world, as it has emerged outside Britain, that have been by far the most decisive influences on this nation’s story and fortunes for a thousand years or more, *and continue to be* so. It is external events around us that have shaped and crafted our nation, our constitution, our place in the world, our character, our fate, our survival.

From the Romans to the arrival of the Norman, from the wars with France to the Reformation, from the Armada to the arrival at Westminster of the Scottish King, from the 17th and 18th century wars of Succession to the Hanoverians, to Napoleon, from Empire and American independence to the Commonwealth network, from Stalin and Hitler to the present day giant autocracies (and the bigger-than-states corporate platforms), from global pandemics to inflation, to energy scares and currency collapse, from trade trends to weak growth, from the rise of China to the trillionth microchip — change has come from our interactions with the

outside world. From each challenge to our national life to the next one, from little understood but powerful external undercurrents, the pressures and pulls of the planet, the mosaic of global wealth and poverty, the enemies and the friends — it is from all of these, and more, that forces have made us what we are and pointed us where we are going.

How in heaven's name could this have been left out of the PM's priorities? How could minds in government have become so inward-looking, so homespun, so narrow, so blind, so ignorant of past and present, and therefore so frighteningly unprepared for the new world conditions fast closing round us? How amidst all the partisan point-scoring and blaming by both sides, could the biggest lessons of our history been forgotten?

Herbert Agar, the American and strongly anglophile author of *A Time for Greatness*, published in the dark days of 1942 and viewed by Margaret Thatcher as a truly great work, warned then that "if the web of history breaks, civilization breaks. Such a break with the past is the most fearful of the calamities that can fall upon humankind."

Of course we cannot blame one individual, one party, one doctrine or one generation. From the low point, the triumph but also the bankruptcy at the end of the Second World War, British leadership, from all sides, has missed almost every avenue back to recovery and momentum and every worthwhile lesson from the wider world. Right up to the ultimate idiocy of "take back control" – a child's view of how the world now works.

Look at the list of things we saw passing us by and ignored. There was, right next door, the rise of the utterly defeated Germany, Italy and Japan. There was the German Mittelstand revival (now admittedly losing its momentum in national confusion); the Italian *surpasso*; the French Monnetist indicative planning; the turn-around of large parts of the misnamed developing world; and the utter failure to notice the rise of the Commonwealth Mark Three, the world's largest and deepest people's network.

There was the fantastic rise of digitally driven Asia and its transformation into the world's fastest rising market, the dwarfing of our little European neighbourhood, still with all its charm, but a dwindling role in the new economic, technological and infrastructural scheme of things. We might have helped turn Europe, not into an ever closer union (obviously out of date), but into an ever *cleverer* union, suitable for the immense transforming effects of the digital age and the world energy transition.

Meanwhile there were, and remain, the deadly dangers of an anarchic future and a collapse of ordered and democratic governance, and of the trust and readiness to compromise, which have held nations and societies together from the outset of the Westphalian age. In their place has come the march of the new fallacies, such as energy "independence" which does not, and cannot, now exist, or the persistence of the old tin gods, like super-power status and American hierarchical primacy, or the classic populist pressures which force protectionist Governments to look inwards – familiar footsteps in the past to world war.

That the whole history of rising British prosperity over five centuries has been built on trade above all, as open and unencumbered as possible, seems to have passed right by the authors and drafters of this sad document called Plan for Change.

Above all, we have to contend with the vast amplification and distortion of the digital age, exaggerating every marginal setback into a major crisis and trend, piling statistical error upon error in an intellectual house of cards.

For example, it took decades for the statisticians, let alone the policy-makers, to understand and try to interpret the modern and largely digitalised service economy. Now understanding has swung too far the other way, like an unchecked pendulum, and almost banished manufacturing as a concept, being accorded a mere 10 per cent of UK GDP.

This is an entirely false way of looking at the structure of economic and social activity and its importance. Every supply chain, every service chain, runs right through the product, construction and manufacturing sectors. One could not exist without the other.

Might as well say that because the head is 8.2% of the body mass it is unimportant. Inability to grasp that probably a third of the economy is grey and several other colours, with transactions only partially recorded, despite Visa and Apple Pay, and rendering announced GDP growth measurements meaningless, and the claimed statistical window on economic activity half blocked.

We continue to live with false measures of who is in work, when a huge sector of work is unrecorded. We gulp down the "Broken Britain" propaganda of what is happening by reporting only what is wrong at the margins. We believe opinion polls, which by definition attract the disgruntled. We wallow in unfavourable comparisons, often made up or based on equally meaningless statistical measures from elsewhere (until those, too, fall apart before our eyes and turn inwards, as round the world some seem to be doing, in obeisance to incoherent populism, from right and left and everywhere/nowhere).

We also allow the opportunities to drift by, as they have under all governments, to transform democratic capitalism into the much more widely shared and much fairer system it ought to be, with the vast majority of households changed from earners into owners, bolstered by greater security. One would think this would be an open goal for intelligent social democratic governments everywhere in an age of great uncertainty. But that is another message which does not seem yet to have got through.

So here is this still potentially star player, the UK, seeking its place in a totally transformed and precarious international landscape. It is misreading its past, blind to its present, muddled about its future, marked by fundamental shifts in the new sources of world power and influence, left floundering and apologising, with this miserable compendium as its credo.

We can surely do much, much better.

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