



By: *Harvey Morris*

Starmmer will have to rethink the game if he plans to score



As a dedicated football fan and a keen amateur player himself, Keir Starmer is well aware that one careless own goal can end up costing you the match.

Yet, in his first year in office, the UK prime minister has committed enough unforced errors for one political historian to suggest that he has made the most inept start of any incoming leader in a hundred years.

The week of his Labour government's first anniversary saw it navigating the latest of a **series** of U-turns, this time to head off a potential **rebellion** by its own MPs over proposed disability benefit cuts.

Public expectations were already low when Labour gained power on July 4 last year in a landslide **victory** based on barely a third of the popular vote. The outcome was more a judgement on the disorderly rule of a succession of Conservative leaders than a vote of confidence that Starmer's party could turn the country around.

The prime minister's detractors now claim he failed to offer a coherent plan beyond an ill-defined promise of change and that, rather than inspiring optimism, he reinforced a national mood of gloom.

The political biographer Anthony Seldon encapsulated a prevailing negative view of Starmer's leadership when he **told** Sky News: "Not in a hundred years has anyone made such an inept start coming into the office of prime minister with so little idea of what he's doing, why he's doing, what story he's telling..."

The prime minister's defenders could argue that he has scored some notable goals in a hyper-challenging year.

A focus on global affairs, errors on the domestic front

He acted quickly and firmly to stem an outbreak of anti-immigrant riots that erupted in the first weeks of his term, even if the

relatively heavy sentences handed down earned him the nickname "two-tier Keir" from right-wing opponents who cited his alleged tolerance for protestors on the left.

On the foreign policy front, he went on to establish what appeared to be a genuine rapport with Donald Trump that may have helped spare the UK the worst excesses of the incoming US president's tariff spree.

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A focus on global affairs - pressure to mend post-Brexit ties with Europe, the need to reassert support for Ukraine plus successive crises in the Middle East - may have distracted Starmer from matters closer to home.

Some of the unforced errors on the domestic front should nevertheless have been spotted in advance by Starmer and his team. The decision by Chancellor Rachel Reeves to **slash** a universal benefit for pensioners in the first month of the Labour term soured perceptions of the new government from the start.

Scrapping annual winter fuel payments to around 10 million pensioners did little to fill the £22 billion fiscal black hole she claimed to have inherited from the Conservatives. But it set the tone for further negative news to come.

Reeves has since rowed back on the policy, **reinstating** the payments for most of those who faced losing out. But, from the image perspective, the damage had already been done.

Unwittingly or not

Starmer himself has acknowledged some of the mistakes of his first year in an **interview** with his own political biographer, Tom Baldwin.

He particularly **regretted** a speech in May in which he said Britain risked becoming “an island of strangers”, unwittingly echoing an old far-right trope about the perils of large-scale immigration.

Unwittingly or not, Starmer managed to alienate many on his own side who feared he was veering to the right on immigration to counter the rise in popularity of Nigel Farage’s Reform Party.

In the interview in the Observer, Starmer put the error down to a poorly phrased speech handed to him after his return from a three-day trip to Ukraine the night before.

That had also been the night of a firebomb **attack** on the Starmer family home in north London, where relatives had been staying since the prime minister and his wife and children moved to Downing Street.

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The incident underlined Starmer’s concerns for the security and privacy of his immediate family since he first aimed for the UK’s most senior political post after a relatively late entry into politics when he switched from an eminent law career.

The former chief prosecutor remains something of an enigmatic figure, even after a decade in the House of Commons. Do his bland manner and somewhat wooden style disguise a progressive reformer or a managerial safe pair of hands? Even among his allies, no one is quite sure.

Insiders believe he can be both ruthless and adaptable, traits that might prove vital for tackling the disorder and backbiting within Downing Street, where rivals seek to monopolise the prime ministerial ear.

Before the whistle blows

As he enters the second year of his five-year term, Starmer may be contemplating reshuffling some positions, at least in his private office if not in his top ministerial team. Perhaps bringing on some substitutes would help him up his game.

In the meantime, the occasional MPs’ rebellion may be the price to pay for such a commanding majority in parliament.



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Anniversaries are always a favourite time for snap judgements. The reality is that Starmer and Labour are barely midway into their first half.

One grassroots supporter claimed she was speaking for many when she pointed to a range of domestic reforms already undertaken that would build a fairer Britain. But these had been ignored or criticised by an unsympathetic media. She cited an early decision to remove tax breaks for private schools.

Even supporters, however, acknowledge that it has been a sticky start, although the prime minister still has time to readjust.

But he will have to come up with a coherent plan that a weary public can finally latch on to if he hopes to survive and notch up a future electoral victory once the whistle blows.