

‘The best’ or ‘world-beating’?: Simply good enough would be a start

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Party conference season has been and gone. And it passed us by quite anonymously this year. With the raft of challenges 2020 is offering, an absence of throngs of party members, campaigners, and lobbyists in an elite cadre of locations failed to muster any notable concern amongst press or public. Instead, we were privy to the now customary virtual communities as is our default in the socially distanced polity.

Labour’s ‘Connected’ event was of course the highlight. The faithful got their first opportunity to see the substance behind Keir Starmer’s competence. His efficiency and professionalism here is not in question, illustrated effectively with his performances hanging a beleaguered Boris Johnson out to dry at PMQ’s. What is in question is Starmer’s vision; for Labour, for Government, for the country.

As this emerged, it was all rather bland. In place of building on the snappy if platitudinous ‘For the many, not the few’, we were presented reductionist cliches playing to the nationalist rhetoric framing English politics. (And this continues to be an English question). His vision was for Britain to be “the best country to grow up in and the best country to grow old in”.

This form of rhetoric is far too commonplace in British politics. The shame really is it has seen Starmer fall into a trap laid by the Conservatives with their threadbare claims for every ill-conceived or failed intervention as being ‘world-leading; track and trace, furlough packages, arts recovery funds. The list here is so endless and promises so hollow, it’s hard to remember this government is less than 10 months old.

There’s an old homespun maxim I recall my Grandmother often saying to me; “If you need to tell me how great you are, you’re probably not”. That this saying, embedded in presumptions of the humility of the British character, should be so easily forsaken by unsubstantiated jingoistic rhetoric should be a concern for us all.

The photographer Kevin Cummins recently released a book of pictures he took during the heady days of Britpop. Documenting the rise of Cool Britannia, in it both he and his subjects reflect on the hollowness of the movement. Whilst undoubtedly a marketing gimmick on steroids, what should be noted of this period is that Britain, and being British, became – briefly – cool. This was not artificially inflated by any misguided notion of national pride, but instead founded on a rejuvenated upstart country – and communities – coming out of the doldrums and renewing itself through a vibrant cultural renaissance.

What I don't recall in this period is anyone using the sort of rhetoric to which Johnson – and now Starmer – are tying themselves. It was an assured confidence, not an artificially inflated egotism underpinned by archaic reference to historic victories in which today's cheerleaders played no part.

At some point, Britain (England) needs to face up to the fact it has a problem. We spend a ridiculous amount of time trying in vain to illustrate we are 'the Best' or 'world-beating', when the reality illustrates a country which habitually fails to live up to both boasts and promise.

The trouble really is if you integrate some grandiose adjective into the name of a country, it's inevitable this will lead to a culture of maladjusted delusion. My understanding is historically the kingdom of Britain was only 'great' to its secondary territory of Aquitaine in France, Little Britain as it was then.

If anything, at this moment in British history we need more critical and analytical thinking. But as soon as we adopt this, these aforementioned foundations crumble as pillars of sand. When British performance in numerous metrics are used, we have for many years performed comparatively poorly.

Back in 1973, one of the reasons for joining the EEC was to address the productivity lag between the UK and the US economy. As we end our involvement, these enduring productivity gaps remain. Similarly prevalent are lags compared to European compatriots like Germany and France. In 2018, the Office for National Statistics found the

productivity gap between the UK and other G7 economies had run largely unchanged^[i].

These issues are as prevalent at the city level as the national. Over 20 years, regeneration in the UK's major cities has seen them transformed. The fact Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and so on have gone from fading industrial antediluvians to vibrant modern metropolises should be acknowledged. The success of British cities in international standings is however limited.

Across key 'liveable cities' indices published by The Economist, Mercer, and Monocle, the common theme is for places in *Mittel* Europe (Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands, Austria), Scandinavia, Canada, and Australia. The presence of British cities in any prominent place is limited, Manchester just about scrapping into The Economist's top 40 and London barely making the top 50.

The list of below-par performance goes on. In almost 20 years involved in public policy, I have seen numerous reports and analysis illustrating poor labour productivity, poor workplace skills, poor management capabilities. Even Brexit cheerleaders like Pritti Patel, Liam Fox, and Dominic Raab, champions of the under-represented British lumpen classes, have been critical of the lazy culture in British workplaces.

These failures extend into broader social measures. The proportion of children at risk of social exclusion in the UK^[ii]. The provision of state pension^[iii]. I could go on, such is the ammunition available.

So, please no more 'moonshots'. The rhetoric goes down well with swivel-eyed, banner-waving loons. Most of us see through such hollow claims. Focus on the small aspects, get the basics done right and to an adapting and improving standard. This means a functional track-and-trace system, a consistency of guidelines, a solid and water-tight safety net focused on the most vulnerable. This means a detailed analysis of and investment in mitigation measures for challenges in Kent, the 'lorry-park of England'. This means speaking to a wide base of stakeholders with expertise in their specific areas, rather than relying on a small cadre of SpAds and their obsession with 'big data'. If these incremental measures are effectively applied, you may just as a by-product start to achieve some level of greatness.

[i] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/economicoutputandproductivity/productivitymeasures/bulletins/internationalcomparisonsofproductivityfinalestimates/2016>

[ii] <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/EDN-20171120-1>

[iii] <https://www.investmentweek.co.uk/investment-week/news/1388133/uk-pensions-poorest-eu>