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Jimmy Carter's malaise-ridden political fate is a warning to Keir Starmer's government



More than 45 years after his term ended, Jimmy Carter is most remembered as a political failure who sermonised to the American public about "malaise". Nick Anstead draws parallels between Carter's troubles, including the structural economic challenges he faced, and many current UK politicians, especially in the Labour Party. In highlighting the UK public's disillusionment with politics and government as Carter did, UK politicians may be inviting the same political fate.

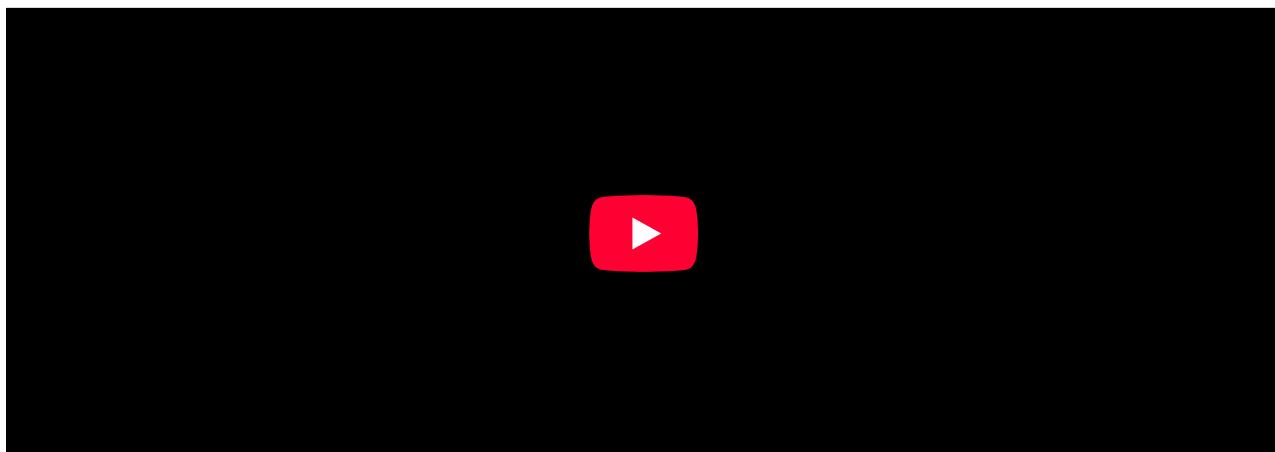
Perhaps somewhat strangely, 45 years after he left office and a year after his death, former US President Jimmy Carter is having a moment in British politics.

This autumn, journalists noted that speeches given by UK politicians as diverse as **Labour Secretary of State for Health Wes Streeting** and **Reform's Danny Kruger** seemed to carry strong Carter echoes. Most strikingly perhaps, a report published this summer by the polling organisation **More In Common** makes sobering reading about the state of British democracy and society. Titled ***Shattered Britain***, the research paints a grim picture of public attitudes to politics and government, with increasing numbers of citizens feeling exhausted and disaffected after nearly a decade of seemingly continual crisis:

From anaemic growth figures to viral social media clips of fare dodgers, the unpredictability of our closest international ally to our inability to complete a railway line, from riots and unrest to repeated changes of Prime Minister – the signs that Britain is on the wrong path are multitude, with many struggling to see how our country can get out of its current malaise (emphasis added) (p.6).

Carter's "malaise speech"

The choice of language instantly recalls Carter's most famous speech, which he gave in July 1979. The address was formally titled *A Crisis of Confidence*, but it quickly became known by a different name: the malaise speech (although ironically Carter never actually used the word in his address).



Carter used the broadcast to diagnose a problem not only with American politics, but with wider society and culture, arguing that consumerism has sapped the ability of the American public to imagine a better future and act for the common good. This experiment in political straight-talking was briefly a success, leading to an immediate increase in Carter's opinion poll numbers. However, the bounce was short-lived. Carter would ultimately lose the November 1980 election in a landslide to Republican Ronald Reagan. In [the article where they declared Reagan as the 1980 Man of the Year](#), Time Magazine offered an obituary for Carter's Presidency. While they noted that the main reason for his defeat was the performance of the American economy, they also observed that Carter:

Was a man who also started out riding the country's high hopes (a TIME Man of the Year in 1976), and who was perhaps most bitterly resented for shrinking those hopes down to the size of a presidency characterized by small people, small talk and small matters. He made Americans feel two things they are not used to feeling, and will not abide. He made them feel puny and he made them feel insecure.



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While there have been some attempts to offer revisionist histories of the Carter years (for example [the detailed account of the writing and response to the malaise speech by the historian Kevin Mattson, the memoir of Carter's policy adviser Stuart E. Eizenstat](#) or the documentary film *Carterland*), the *Time Magazine* verdict has remained the dominant one: given the choice, Americans much preferred Reagan's optimistic vision of morning in America to Carter's sermonising about malaise. Given that the dominant historical view of the malaise speech is that it was a political failure, it is particularly striking that its language and tone has been replicated in British politics in recent months.

Lessons from Carter for British politics now

The course of Carter's presidency offers a warning to contemporary British politicians, and particularly those in the current Labour government. Like them, Carter ascended to office with a spectacular election victory [where his main message focused on the venality and incompetence of his political opponents](#). In the years after defeat in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, this message resonated with the public. However, when he entered office, Carter was faced by the same structural challenges as his predecessors, including low economic growth, high inflation, energy insecurity and international instability.

Carter did attempt some major reforms, [notably in the energy market](#). However, he found it hard to explain his policy programme. His Vice-President Walter Mondale (quoted in Stuart Eizenstat's account of the administration) noted that Carter "was terrible at the public education role, and he had no confidence in himself." Furthermore, Carter's modus operandi frequently involved combining state and market-based solutions to bring about political change. This meant he faced challenges from both sides of the political spectrum, in the form of Ted Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. These left-right flanking manoeuvres of the Carter administration were damaging precisely because both rival groups could draw on clearer, seemingly more cohesive narrative accounts of what they would do in office (and, by extension, what Carter was doing wrong). While Carter was able to defeat Kennedy in the bitterly fought 1980 Democratic Party primaries, his loss to Reagan would usher in a new era in American politics. Labour faces a similar challenge today, faced by the Greens to its left and Reform to its right.

The final similarity between Carter's era and our own is the political and social background noise. The 1970s fixation on the idea of crisis, societal instability and conspiracy theories is very recognisable. If nothing else, Jimmy Carter acts as a powerful reminder just how hard it is to do politics at such junctions in history.

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