# Starmer’s winter fuel U-turn exposes Labour’s internal divide as Badenoch falters



In a remarkable display of political theatrics, the latest Prime Minister’s Questions revealed the depth of turmoil within the Labour Party under Sir Keir Starmer’s leadership. Faced with backlash following a controversial cut to winter fuel payments, Starmer performed a notable about-face, suggesting changes to the eligibility criteria designed to benefit millions of pensioners. His reversal, labelled by some as an “inevitable U-turn,” has raised eyebrows regarding not just his leadership but the broader trajectory of Labour as a viable political alternative.

Starmer's previous decision, made in July as part of a set of austerity measures, aimed to save £1.5 billion by limiting winter fuel payments to only the most financially vulnerable retirees, specifically those on means-tested pension credits. This policy affected around 11 million people and was met with significant criticism, including from within his party. In the wake of dismal local election results, where Labour lost ground to the right-leaning Reform UK party led by Nigel Farage, Starmer's proposal to re-evaluate the scheme underscored the pressures mounting from both his colleagues and constituents. Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, among others, had been vocal in urging the leadership to adopt policies that would actively combat child poverty and create a more equitable economic framework.

What should have been a straightforward political strike during PMQs, however, turned into an unexpected advantage for Starmer as Kemi Badenoch, the Conservative leader, seemed oblivious to the opportunities laid before her. As Starmer laid out his plans to expand the criteria for winter fuel payments—essentially acknowledging the detrimental impact of his earlier cuts—Badenoch floundered, sticking to her prepared script and failing to seize the initiative. Instead of capitalising on a moment of political weakness, she drifted through the session, offering vague statements on the economy.

Observers noted this dynamic as a striking indictment of the current state of Conservative leadership. With Badenoch appearing disconnected from the pressing concerns of the electorate, Starmer, who many had viewed as cornered, found himself welcomed into a space ripe for influence. This was particularly notable as Starmer’s statistics painted a picture of an economy supposedly on the mend, with claims of improved growth and reduced borrowing.

Badenoch further muddied her position as she inadvertently downplayed her party's impending troubles, dismissing Starmer's U-turn as though it were an everyday occurrence. The Tory benches reflected dismay, revealing how low expectations have sunk within the party. By failing to challenge Starmer effectively, Badenoch handed him a rare opportunity in a landscape dominated by criticism and unrest.

The implications of this encounter go beyond mere politicking. The back-and-forth exemplifies a deeper rift within Labour regarding fiscal policy, particularly as the party grapples with internal disagreements over austerity versus public investment. Leaked memos suggest there are opposing views among key figures like Angela Rayner and Rachel Reeves, who differ on how best to approach the party’s economic strategy. Rayner’s inclination towards increased public spending and higher taxes contrasts sharply with Reeves' more cautious fiscal conservatism, focused on reducing public expenditures.

Such discord raises questions about Labour's long-term vision and its capacity to deliver on promises related to welfare and economic growth. Critics argue that the latest U-turn might placate dissent in the short term, but the underlying issues—such as rising inflation and public sector borrowing—remain pressing challenges that require more than temporary fixes.

As Starmer seeks to bolster his credibility amidst criticism, the spectre of fiscal limitations looms large, suggesting that any semblance of a victory may be fleeting. Observers are left wondering whether Labour can truly reposition itself as a champion for the disadvantaged, or if it will continue to falter under the weight of its policy inconsistencies and internal strife. In the interim, Kemi Badenoch's performance may illustrate an unwittingly supportive role for Starmer, as he seeks to navigate the troubled waters of contemporary British politics.

Though some may find humour in Badenoch's repeated missteps, the reality remains that the stability of both major parties hangs delicately in the balance. As they grapple with an electorate increasingly receptive to new narratives, the question persists: can the Labour Party realign to meet the needs of its constituents, or will it remain entangled in a web of its own making?

### Reference Map

1. [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/may/21/labour-does-a-major-u-turn-but-does-clueless-kemi-even-notice)
2. [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/9761affa-6c67-4396-baa7-35424051865f)
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4. [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/c714047c-267b-4415-af41-82ffd36be437)
5. [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uks-starmer-says-more-pensioners-should-be-eligible-winter-fuel-payments-2025-05-21/)
6. [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/0b593691-6f40-4c04-b2f5-d31a602f021d)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/may/21/labour-does-a-major-u-turn-but-does-clueless-kemi-even-notice> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/9761affa-6c67-4396-baa7-35424051865f> - Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer has reversed the decision to cut winter fuel payments for pensioners, responding to backlash after Labour's poor performance in local elections. The cuts, implemented last July, had eliminated £1.5 billion in aid for around 10 million pensioners, limiting eligibility to those on means-tested pension credits. Starmer indicated at Prime Minister's Questions that eligibility thresholds would be reviewed to allow broader access. The reversal follows mounting pressure from Labour MPs and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown, who urged the government to tackle child poverty with a £9 billion plan, including ending the two-child benefit cap.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/af6f5ab3cead13dc233676655b41dd96> - British Prime Minister Keir Starmer indicated a potential reversal of a widely criticized policy that cut winter fuel subsidies for millions of retirees. Addressing Parliament amid rising inflation, Starmer emphasized the need to extend winter fuel payments to more pensioners to alleviate cost-of-living pressures. The policy, initially implemented by Treasury Chief Rachel Reeves shortly after Labour took office in July, limited the annual £200–£300 payments to only the poorest retirees, affecting around 11 million people. The move saved £1.5 billion but sparked significant political backlash and was cited as a factor in Labour's poor performance in recent local elections. Starmer suggested changes would be announced in the next budget, citing improved UK economic conditions, including higher growth, lower borrowing costs, and successful trade deals with the EU, India, and the United States. The opposition questioned Starmer's credibility, calling the policy shift an "inevitable U-turn." Starmer defended the reconsideration, suggesting that stronger finances now allow broader support for pensioners.
4. <https://www.ft.com/content/c714047c-267b-4415-af41-82ffd36be437> - A leaked memo from Angela Rayner to Rachel Reeves before the Spring Statement reveals internal Labour Party divisions over fiscal strategy. Rayner advocated for raising taxes rather than cutting public spending, positioning herself as a leading alternative should Keir Starmer step down. Rachel Reeves, the Chancellor, is reportedly reconsidering the decision to means-test the winter fuel allowance due to public backlash. This reflects broader tensions within the Labour government as it grapples with difficult fiscal choices, including university funding cuts and welfare reductions, amid resistance to tax increases. The underlying issue is the government’s struggle to reconcile austerity measures with public expectations, a tension apparent since 2015. The political risk is heightened as any reversal on the winter fuel policy could lead to further demands to abandon other austerity measures. Meanwhile, Rayner’s stance suggests a contrasting vision focused on higher taxation and increased public spending, adding to speculation about future Labour leadership dynamics. The memo highlights a fundamental philosophical divide within the government’s approach to economic policy.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uks-starmer-says-more-pensioners-should-be-eligible-winter-fuel-payments-2025-05-21/> - British Prime Minister Keir Starmer indicated he may reverse a contentious cut to winter fuel payments for the elderly, a move initially made by his Labour government in July as part of broader spending reductions aimed at addressing public finance deficits attributed to the former Conservative administration. The payments, valued at £200-£300 ($268-$402), help subsidize heating costs for millions of pensioners. Initially defended on the grounds that many recipients were financially well-off, the cut faced significant criticism, including from Labour lawmakers and allied trade unions. Starmer’s recent openness to revisiting the eligibility threshold follows disappointing local election results in which Labour lost support to the right-wing Reform UK party, led by Nigel Farage, which now leads in opinion polls. Starmer stated that any changes would be considered during a fiscal event expected in October, emphasizing the desire to relieve financial pressures on older citizens as the economy improves. Reinstating broader eligibility for the payments would mark an embarrassing policy reversal for the Prime Minister.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/0b593691-6f40-4c04-b2f5-d31a602f021d> - Chancellor Rachel Reeves is under mounting pressure following a controversial U-turn on her decision to scrap winter fuel payments for 10 million pensioners, a policy initially introduced to demonstrate fiscal discipline. The reversal, confirmed by Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer, sparked concerns about Reeves' judgment and her ability to withstand political backlash over unpopular decisions. This move follows Labour's poor performance in local elections, where the cuts were widely unpopular, prompting party members to pressure leadership to reconsider. The retreat has fueled internal party debate, with some MPs suggesting it reveals a reactive, tactical governance style. It also arises amid broader fiscal challenges: Reeves faces a tough public spending review in June, potential welfare cuts, and difficult budget decisions due to growing public sector borrowing and weak public finances. Some Labour MPs are now urging Reeves to consider tax increases, especially targeting the wealthy, instead of more painful spending cuts. While some believe the U-turn could help Reeves regain political capital and push through necessary reforms like changes to disability benefits, others see it as a sign of vulnerability. Despite positive GDP growth, experts warn Reeves' fiscal challenges are far from over as borrowing continues to exceed forecasts.