# Both sides are weaponising catastrophe — and it’s hollowing out practical politics



The recent skirmish between competing brands of political alarmism — the shrill, red‑white‑and‑blue rhetoric of the “Union Jack Catastrophists” and the handwringing of a progressive Left that has at times trafficked in its own apocalyptic language — has exposed a deeper problem in British public life: facts and nuance are being sacrificed to political theatre. The original critique that set off this debate argued that figures on both sides now traffic in exaggerated narratives that flatter their base and distort the scale and causes of the country’s problems. According to that account, what began as partisan diagnosis has hardened into national mood music that too often replaces practical policymaking. (This paragraph draws on the original column and cultural context.)

That cultural contest was illustrated recently when a former prime minister, who once spoke warmly of Deptford’s restaurants and the character of south‑east London, adopted a much darker script in an interview with an American commentator — framing London as the seat of an “elite that hates Britain” and urging the mobilisation of those outside the capital. The contrast between earlier, more parochial enthusiasms for neighbourhood eateries and the later nationalistic rhetoric has been seized on by critics on all sides. Food‑writing and neighbourhood guides underline the point: Deptford remains a lively, diverse food‑scene emblem — a reminder of the very urban vitality that some commentators now single out for blame. (This paragraph uses the original column and coverage of Deptford’s culinary revival.)

At the same time, the public square has seen a raft of less‑than‑careful interventions that add fuel to the fire. A Conservative figure in one coastal constituency wrongly identified charity rowers as migrants in distress, triggering a small local emergency and later an apology and a fundraising pledge to the crew. Such gaffes amplify anxieties and make it easier for alarmist messaging to spread on social media, where snippets and images can be detached from context and posted as evidence of national decline. (This paragraph draws on the original piece and the reporting on the mistaken identification of the rowers.)

Nor is the progressive response blameless. A number of commentators and Labour‑aligned voices have deployed stark, moral‑language diagnoses of Britain’s condition: serious sentences about failing public services, crumbling institutions and social breakdown have formed part of the case for urgent, systemic reform. There is a necessary place for such argument: exposing failures matters. But when that language migrates from careful diagnosis into a steady drumbeat of national catastrophe it becomes both self‑defeating and politically exploitable. The country’s attractiveness — its inward migration pressures, the strains on housing and the NHS, and the concentration of opportunity in London — is, paradoxically, in part a sign of success and global demand rather than simple rot. (This paragraph synthesises the original column and context about immigration and urban pressure.)

The empirical picture is, as statisticians like to say, more complicated than the slogans. Long‑run data from the national statistics agency show that some categories of crime have fallen substantially over the past two decades, while other types of high‑harm offending and regional patterns display variability. Police‑recorded figures are shaped by reporting and recording practices; survey data provide a complementary read on long‑term trends. That technical caveat matters politically because charts and social‑media infographics that compress complexity into a single line are being used as proof either that “everything is getting worse” or that “everything is getting better”, depending on the teller. (This paragraph uses the ONS analysis and the original commentary about crime charts.)

The debate over public services brings the rhetoric into sharper relief. In an interview with Laura Kuenssberg, the prime minister said the NHS was “broken” after decades of underfunding and mismanagement — a blunt assessment that echoes earlier Guardian columns by the prime minister describing a “mountain of mess” bequeathed by the previous administration. Those comments are not mere rhetorical excess: they are a political posture that seeks to justify deep reform and sustained investment. Yet critics on the Right point to such language as evidence of Labour despairing of the national project, while critics on the Left say stronger words are required to force action. Both readings are, in part, true; the political use of stark language has therefore become a double‑edged sword. (This paragraph refers to the prime minister’s interview and his Guardian piece.)

There are also unequivocal, evidence‑based problems that demand urgent attention and cannot be dismissed as partisan spin. The National Audit Office has concluded that government efforts to tackle violence against women and girls have not yet improved outcomes for victims: prevalence remains high, governance is fragmented and the evidence base for what works is insufficient. Those findings underpin why politicians of all stripes are rightly forced to confront the issue as more than a campaign talking point. When such reports land alongside rhetorically charged political claims, however, the public conversation can become skewed towards denunciation rather than remediation. (This paragraph draws on the NAO report and the broader argument from the lead column.)

If public trust is to be repaired, both sides must change their tempo. Political leaders should use blunt language sparingly and back it with clear plans, measurable targets and transparent data; statisticians and watchdogs — the ONS and NAO among them — should be central to that process, translating complex trends into actionable policy choices rather than serving as ammunition for partisan soundbites. That means accepting uncomfortable truths where they are robustly evidenced, and resisting the temptation to reduce every policy debate to apocalyptic narratives. Only by re‑anchoring argument in verifiable facts and concrete interventions can the country shift from mutual denunciation to the steady work of reform. (This concluding paragraph synthesises the ONS and NAO findings, the Guardian tone and the original column’s call for mutual accountability.)

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* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://london.eater.com/maps/best-restaurants-deptford-south-east-london)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/rupert-lowe-reform-small-boats-migrants-mnd-charity-b2804179.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://london.eater.com/maps/best-restaurants-deptford-south-east-london)
* Paragraph 5 – [[3]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/latest), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1m0vxxk7yno), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/12/toory-government-mess-keir-starmer), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 7 – [[4]](https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/governments-efforts-to-address-violence-against-women-and-girls-have-not-yet-improved-outcomes-for-victims/), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 8 – [[3]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/latest), [[4]](https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/governments-efforts-to-address-violence-against-women-and-girls-have-not-yet-improved-outcomes-for-victims/), [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/12/toory-government-mess-keir-starmer), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-14996441/DAN-HODGES-Keir-Starmers-nightmarish-vision-wrong-hypocritical-Hes-talking-Britain-down.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1m0vxxk7yno> - BBC News reports on 7 September 2024 that Prime Minister Keir Starmer told Laura Kuenssberg the NHS is 'broken' after successive Conservative governments and years of austerity. The piece covers Starmer’s interview in Downing Street and summarises his view that the health service’s current state is 'unforgivable', citing an imminent review by surgeon Lord Darzi. Starmer blamed coalition-era austerity and later Conservative pandemic mismanagement for leaving the NHS in an 'awful position', and highlighted concerns about children being let down. The article notes wider political reaction and places Starmer’s remarks in the context of health-service reform plans and future announcements.
3. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/latest> - The Office for National Statistics bulletin 'Crime in England and Wales' provides annual data showing long-term trends and recent changes in police recorded crime and the Crime Survey for England and Wales. The latest releases indicate that some crime categories have fallen over the past two decades, with notable decreases in theft and certain violent offences, while other areas such as specific high-harm crimes show variability. The report emphasises methodological caveats: police-recorded figures reflect recording practices and activity, whereas the survey offers the best indicator for long-term trends. Detailed tables and commentary contextualise changes by offence type, region and year.
4. <https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/governments-efforts-to-address-violence-against-women-and-girls-have-not-yet-improved-outcomes-for-victims/> - The National Audit Office published a report concluding that government efforts to tackle violence against women and girls (VAWG) have not yet improved outcomes for victims. The press release summarises findings: at least one in twelve women are victims annually, and around 20% of police recorded crime relates to VAWG. The NAO found the Home Office lacked cross‑government leadership, had limited understanding of spending across departments, and could not demonstrate which interventions worked. Many commitments were administrative rather than new initiatives. The report urges clearer governance, better data and targeted investment to meet ambitions such as halving VAWG prevalence nationally.
5. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/rupert-lowe-reform-small-boats-migrants-mnd-charity-b2804179.html> - The Independent reports that Great Yarmouth MP Rupert Lowe mistakenly identified a charity rowing crew as 'illegal migrants' after posting a photograph on social media. The Row4MND team, undertaking a Land’s End to John O'Groats fundraising row for motor neurone disease, were contacted by HM Coastguard following public concern. Lowe initially vowed to 'use every tool' to deport any migrants but later acknowledged the error, describing it as a 'false alarm' and pledging a £1,000 donation to the crew’s fundraiser. The piece records reactions from the rowers, local authorities and commentary on the wider political context of migration anxieties nationally.
6. <https://london.eater.com/maps/best-restaurants-deptford-south-east-london> - Eater London’s guide to the best restaurants in Deptford highlights the neighbourhood’s culinary revival, focusing on independent eateries clustered around Deptford Market Yard and Evelyn Street. It profiles Vietnamese noodle rooms, Caribbean spots such as Buster Mantis, taco stands, izakaya-style kitchens and new breweries, praising the area’s diversity, affordability and community atmosphere. The piece situates Deptford as part of a wider south‑east London food renaissance, noting how railway arches and market spaces have been repurposed for creative hospitality ventures. Detailed listings, addresses and short reviews aim to help readers explore Deptford’s most celebrated small venues and street food traders regularly.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jul/12/toory-government-mess-keir-starmer> - In a Guardian opinion piece of 12 July 2024, Keir Starmer, newly appointed prime minister, accused the previous Conservative government of arrogance, recklessness and systemic failures that left the country in a 'mountain of mess'. Starmer argued Labour would pursue serious, long‑term fixes rather than short‑term gimmicks, and warned that restoring public services and fiscal stability would take time. He criticised past complacency over issues from prisons to sewage and pledged a government of service. The column sought to set the tone for his administration by framing disclosure of inherited problems as a moral imperative for urgent remedial action nationally.