

# Is Britain broken?

Ist Großbritannien noch zu retten? LORRAINE MALLINDER wirft einen schonungslosen Blick auf das Land und seine Krisen.

ADVANCED

No future, no future, no future for you,” snarled the Sex Pistols in their hit song “God Save the Queen”. That was back in 1977, when Britain was known as the “sick man of Europe”. The year before, it had gone cap in hand to the IMF for a loan. A year later, the Winter of Discontent began, with strikes breaking out across the country. People despaired.

Sound familiar? Fast-forward to 2023 and Britain is in a right old mess again. Only, it all seems a lot more apocalyptic.

Welcome to “Broken Britain”, a place where the overworked and underpaid no longer believe in “keep calm and carry on”. Striking nurses and teachers, squeezed like never before, are told to like it or lump it. Parents struggling to pay energy bills are forced on to expensive prepayment meters. More and more people are queuing at food banks, many working full-time and wondering how the hell things got so bad.

But, hey, let’s get things into perspective. The country is just going through a rough patch, right? It wasn’t doing so badly before the pandemic – well, except for the fractures over

Scottish independence and leaving the EU. It’s true that Brexit began an almighty cost-of-living crisis. The war in Ukraine didn’t help, sending energy prices skyrocketing. And then, of course, there was the death of Her Majesty the Queen – drawing VIPs from around the world. The country was bound to feel a bit flat afterwards, especially with Liz Truss in charge for a whole six weeks. Sorry, Liz who?

Can Britain bounce back? Or has it passed the point of no return, rushing towards a dystopian future, a place that looks a bit like George Orwell’s 1984, where nothing works and everything smells of cabbage?

## POVERTY

Even if Britain isn’t broken, it’s definitely broke. The cost-of-living crisis, first seen as a temporary setback caused by Brexit and the war in Ukraine, has since turned into a permacrisis. The price of basic goods such as pasta and butter has doubled or even tripled in the past year. And food banks, once a last resort, now serve the “working poor” – with reports that teachers and civil servants are also standing in the queues.

## INFO TO GO

The phrase “Winter of Discontent” is taken from the opening lines of the play *Richard III* by William Shakespeare.

### bounce back [baʊns]

- wieder auf die Beine kommen

### broke ifml.

- bankrott

### cabbage

- Kohl

### cap in hand

- demütig

### civil servant [ˈsɪvəl]

- Beamter, Beamtin

### fast-forward

- vorspulen

### food bank N. Am.

- Tafel für Bedürftige

### IMF (International Monetary Fund)

- IWF (Internationaler Währungsfonds)

### last resort [rɪˈzɔːt]

- letzter Ausweg

### lump sth. ifml.

- etw. hinnehmen, schlucken

### meter

- Zähler

### perspective: get sth. into ~ [pəˈspektɪv]

- etw. relativieren, nüchtern betrachten

### rough patch [ˈrʌf pætʃ]

- UK ifml.  
• schwierige Phase

### setback

- Rückschlag, Einbruch

### skyrocket

- sprunghaft ansteigen

### snarl

- knurren, fauchen

### squeeze sb.

- jmdn. ausbeuten

### temporary [ˈtempərəri]

- vorübergehend

### triple

- sich verdreifachen

### Winter of Discontent

- Winter des Missvergnügens

To understand how earnings have shrunk, consider that wages went up by 36 per cent in the 16 years between 1992 and 2008. However, in the 16 years leading to 2024, the UK's Office for Budget Responsibility has forecast a rise of only 2.4 per cent. Many of the "working poor" have been forced into the benefits system. Cuts in benefits between 2014 and 2020 have pushed 400,000 people into poverty, according to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

## HEALTH

Suffering a heart attack? Make sure you call the ambulance 12 hours before you need it if you want to get to the hospital on time. Record waits for ambulances are a fact of life in Broken Britain. Should you actually make it to hospital, you'll find A&E departments packed with patients unable to get an appointment with their local doctor.

As a symbol of national unity, Britain's National Health Service is under pressure. This is a unique institution, free at the point of use, based on need rather than ability to pay. The deal has always been that people pay their taxes and receive services. Only now, despite paying more in taxes, patients routinely wait more than a year for treatment, often dying in the process. Now, there's talk of a "managed decline", with the government actively trying to move towards a privately funded model.

Meanwhile, after long years of terrible conditions and a pandemic that brought them to breaking point, nurses and doctors are striking. Morale is at an all-time low. With the NHS now on life support, the state of the nation's health is looking terminal.

## EDUCATION

When Prime Minister Rishi Sunak spoke of plans to make the study of mathematics obligatory until the age of 18, teachers up and down the country enjoyed a rare moment of mirth. His bright idea mainly served to highlight the sector's current recruitment crisis, especially dire for mathematics.

The crisis affects all subjects. Government figures show that 26,433 teachers who qualified in the past five years have already left the sector. On average, one in eight leave in their first year, with one in four quitting after three years.

During the pandemic, teachers worked hard to develop online learning plans, under pressure to keep up standards and metrics, even as they were dealing with an increase in mental health problems among students. Over time, a cost-of-living crisis has emerged, and teachers have faced a pay cut of 23 per cent in real terms since 2010.

## BREXIT

Oh, where are the sunlit uplands of Brexit Britain? When former Prime Minister Boris Johnson led the country into Brexit, he promised a halcyon era of economic growth and optimism. Now that the pandemic is over, we can see the promised land more clearly. And it looks a bit like Mordor.

**A&E (accident & emergency) department** UK  
 ▶ Notaufnahme

**affect sth.**  
 ▶ etw. betreffen

**benefits system**  
 ▶ Sozialsystem

**breaking point: to ~**  
 ▶ bis zur Grenze der Belastbarkeit

**dire** ['daɪə]  
 ▶ schlimm

**halcyon** ['hælsjən]  
 ▶ glücklich

**heart attack**  
 ▶ Herzinfarkt

**life support: be on ~**  
 ▶ künstlich am Leben erhalten werden

**mental health** [helθ]  
 ▶ psychisch

**metrics**  
 ▶ hier: Leistungsmerkmale

**mirth**  
 ▶ Freude

**Mordor**

▶ fiktives Reich des Bösen in der Trilogie *Der Herr der Ringe* von J.R.R. Tolkien

**National Health Service (NHS)** ['helθ] UK  
 ▶ staatlicher Gesundheitsdienst

**Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR)** [ri'spɒnsə'bɪləti] UK  
 ▶ (unabhängige) Haushaltsaufsichtsbehörde

**on time**  
 ▶ rechtzeitig

**recruitment** [ri'kru:tmənt]  
 ▶ Personalbeschaffung

**terminal**  
 ▶ am Ende

**unique** [ju'ni:k]  
 ▶ einzigartig



No money for expensive shopping trips

Fotos: John Harris/report digital/REA/laif; Bloomberg via Getty Images



Cityscape: a picture of poverty in Leeds

Could it be that leaving the world's biggest trading bloc did not – to paraphrase the famous catchphrase – “unchain Britannia”? Post-Brexit, Britain was supposed to do even more business with the EU. Instead, businesses are faced with border controls, customs checks, import duties and inspections. It's been a nightmare for labour markets, creating shortages at home and making it difficult to work abroad. Business investment has slumped to eight per cent below pre-pandemic levels. The pound has crashed.

But it's all OK. We now have our traditional blue passports once again!

## THE DISUNITED KINGDOM

The United Kingdom probably won't be falling apart in the near future, as many commentators suggest. But it definitely needs sticking back together with a good dose of Gorilla Glue.

Scotland, which has been threatening to leave the UK for 16 years, now finds itself in a political dead end. After

voting “no” in the 2014 independence referendum, it was later dragged kicking and screaming out of the EU. Westminster will not give permission for a replay. So, it looks like Scotland is stuck.

Northern Ireland could eventually hold a referendum to join the Republic of Ireland in the South. With Sinn Féin, a party looking for reunification, now the biggest political force in both the North and the South, this could happen within a decade. Brexit has managed to split the unionists by creating a trade border over the Irish Sea – an own goal for Westminster.

## CONCLUSION

Is Britain broken? Not so long ago, in 2012, the country was showcasing its witty, ironic, self-deprecating best self to the world in the opening ceremony of the Summer Olympics, the Queen and James Bond pretending to jump from their helicopter into the stadium.

Is this the same country? Maybe we took it all for granted. Or maybe the

### catchphrase

[ˈkætʃfreiz]

- Schlagwort, Slogan

### drag

- schleppen, ziehen

### eventually

[ɪˈventʃuəli]

- irgendwann

### Gorilla Glue

- Super-Sekundenkleber

### granted: take sth. for ~

- etw. als selbstverständlich erachten

### nightmare

- Albtraum

### reunification

[ˌriːˌjuːnɪfɪˈkeɪʃən]

- Wiedervereinigung

### self-deprecating

- selbstironisch

### shortage

[ˈʃɔːtɪdʒ]

- Engpass

### showcase sth.

- etw. stolz präsentieren

### slump

- fallen



cracks were already appearing in a nation divided on issues such as age, class, opportunity and on existential questions about our colonial past and our future as a nation.

With so many repeated blows, some of them self-inflicted, over recent years, Britain's confidence has taken a major hit. There's no doubt that a narrative has set in, a story that the nation is telling itself about crumbling institutions and dwindling prospects.

However, a general election is on the horizon. Does the country simply need a refresh, a new government that will take it beyond recent horrors? Is the Labour Party right for the job? There have been lots of sharp debates in the media on the state of the nation. Britain's resilience lies in its diverse and ever-evolving society, which is being tested like never before. It's a test we cannot afford to fail.

#### crumble

- bröckeln

#### dwindle

- schwinden

#### ever-evolving

- sich kontinuierlich wandelnd, entwickelnd

#### prospects

- Perspektive, Zukunftsaussichten

#### resilience

- Belastbarkeit

#### self-inflicted

- selbstverschuldet

A demonstration in London: trust in politicians is low



## Statistics: UK vs Germany

	UK	GERMANY
Population	67m	84m
Average income (euros)	45k	51k
Life expectancy at birth (years)	80.4	80.9
Happiness (global ranking)	17	14
PISA (global ranking)	17	20
Youth unemployment rate	13.2%	6.9%
Alcohol consumption (litres of pure alcohol per year of)	11.4	13.4

Figures from *OECD.org*, *worldbank.org*, *economist.com*, WHO, "World Happiness Report", PISA

k = Tausend

## THE HISTORY OF THE PHRASE "BROKEN BRITAIN"

Back in the late 2000s, when Britain was still more or less sane, the opposition Conservative Party invented a phrase to describe decay in British society. "Broken Britain" was shorthand for sink estates, gangs, drugs and knife crime. The moral panic reached its highpoint with the 2011 riots, when young people across the country went out on the streets, setting fire to cars and buildings and looting shops. People who had never been on a housing estate decided that Britain needed some law and order. But a new story was taking shape in which people not usually seen in the media were finally being given the chance to tell their version of events – about living on the edge of a class-ridden society in which education and opportunity had become a privilege for the rich. Since then, Britain has evolved into a more open and tolerant society. And, paradoxically, the term "Broken Britain" has come to refer to the failings of the party that invented the term in the first place.

#### class-ridden

- unter dem Klassensystem leidend

#### decay

- Verfall

#### housing estate

- Wohnsiedlung

#### knife crime

- Messerstechereien

#### loot

- plündern

#### riots

- Unruhen, Aufstand

#### shorthand

- Kurzform

#### sink estate

- Problemviertel