

FABIAN REVIEW

The quarterly magazine of the Fabian Society

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FORWARD MARCH



*140 years of Fabianism, with Keir Starmer MP, Sadiq Khan, Stella Creasy MP, Anas Sarwar MSP, Michael Crick and more **p10** / Richard Johnson on Labour in opposition **p22** / Louise Thompson looks at MPs' constituency links **p24***

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FABIAN REVIEW

Volume 136—No.1

		<u>Leader</u>	
<i>Andrew Harrop</i>	4	In the vanguard	
		<u>Shortcuts</u>	
<i>Sue Ferns</i>	5	A reliable option	
<i>Farah Hussain</i>	5	A crucial mission	
<i>Susan Hawley</i>	6	Cleaning up	
<i>Sem Moema</i>	7	Crisis point	
<i>Iggy Wood</i>	8	Seeing red	
<i>Eunice Goes</i>	9	Winds of change	
		<u>Cover story</u>	
<i>Keir Starmer MP, Sadiq Khan, Stella Creasy MP, Sara Hyde, Sir Vince Cable, David Blunkett, Kirsty McNeill, Anas Sarwar MSP, LJ Davies, Faridah Zaman, Chris Renwick, Michael Crick, Eli Harris</i>	10	Onwards and upwards	
	16	Cover to cover	
<i>Kate Murray</i>	18	Views from the top	
		<u>Features</u>	
<i>Michael Shanks MP</i>	21	Restoring trust	
<i>Richard Johnson</i>	22	Outside No 10	
<i>Louise Thompson</i>	24	Home turf	
<i>Will Lord</i>	26	Superpower status	
<i>Jane Hutt MS</i>	28	Blueprint for change	
<i>Francesca Sellors</i>	30	No silver bullet	
		<u>Books</u>	
<i>Stewart Lansley</i>	29	Redressing the balance	
		<u>Fabian Society section</u>	
<i>Michael Ward</i>	33	Two typewriters that clicked as one	
	34	The Fabian quiz	
	35	Listings	



FABIAN REVIEW

Fabian Review is the quarterly journal of the Fabian Society. Like all publications of the Fabian Society, it represents not the collective view of the society, but only the views of the individual writers. The responsibility of the society is limited to approving its publications as worthy of consideration within the Labour movement.

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In the vanguard

The Fabian Society has been at the forefront of change throughout its existence, writes *Andrew Harrop*

For 140 years, the Fabian Society has been shaping the future of Britain's democratic left. In its first decades, the society tried to inject radical ideas into the programmes of the established 19th century political parties. When that failed, Fabians helped to found the Labour party, bequeathing it both an openly socialist constitution and a faculty for practical, empirical government.

Those early Fabians are most famous for creating the intellectual foundations for Britain's welfare state. They reconceptualised poverty as a structural rather than a moral failing and made the case for free, universal public services. And while Fabianism is indelibly associated with the power of national government to transform lives, our work has always championed mutualism, localism and internationalism, not just the big state.

More recently the Fabian tradition has absorbed social liberation and environmentalism, alongside our lodestars of equality and collectivism. In fact, the last 140 years have been a story of constant reinvention. The 1945 government may seem the high point of Fabian politics, but within months of the fall of the Attlee government the society initiated the revisionism that would eventually inspire the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s. Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, the Fabians helped steer the party back to electability, with our combination of psephological and policy rigour.

In each period, it has been Fabian people, not just Fabian thinking, that have made the difference. From 1884 to 2024, the society has been a platform where leading figures test their ideas and an incubator of future talent.

When past and present Fabian general secretaries came together for this issue of *Fabian Review*, we debated the different roles the Fabian Society has played

during Labour's spells in government and opposition. At moments of crisis, such as the early-1980s or the late-2010s, the society has helped hold the Labour party together. In the run-up to government, we have provided technical policy work for the opposition front bench and helped shape manifestos. When Labour was last in power we helped lay the ground for critical changes in office, such as earmarked tax rises for the NHS.

Now it is increasingly likely that Labour will move from another long period of opposition into government. There is no room for complacency, but the Fabians can again look forward to supporting the party make that transition. The society has spent the past four years feeding ideas into the party's policy programme. The standout contribution has been our work on building a National Care Service for England, a proposal which could not be more rooted in the Fabian intellectual tradition.

If Labour takes office the society's role will change once more. There will be the whole of the civil service to do technical, analytical work for Labour ministers. But the Fabian Society will be there to help Labour see the wood from the trees. We will assess whether the hundreds of individual choices that ministers take are sufficient in their scale and scope to transform the country over time. And we will help Labour to refresh its thinking in power, so that Keir Starmer is able to lead a multi-term government of the left.

The Fabian Society will always be a proud supporter of Labour in power. But it is inevitable that Fabians will sometimes challenge the party to go further and faster. While there is a single child in Britain living in hardship, without the prospect of equal life chances with their richer peers, members of the Fabian Society will challenge the British left to do more. **F**

Shortcuts



A RELIABLE OPTION

Nuclear can power Labour's clean energy future — *Sue Ferns*

Whatever Rishi Sunak might tell you, the last 14 years of energy policy have been an unmitigated disaster. Under a government that has consistently prioritised short-term fixes over delivering a long-term energy strategy, we have wasted a decade and a half at a crucial juncture in the long and difficult process of decarbonisation.

The UK is failing to build new infrastructure at the speed and scale needed to meet our urgent climate and energy security goals. As the US, EU, China, and others race ahead to develop a leading edge in the jobs and industries created by the energy transition, we are falling further behind.

Labour's green prosperity plan offers the opportunity to reverse this decline by building a partnership between government, businesses, and workers. While Labour has recently revised the headline figure for public investment under the plan, crucially, it remains committed to a sustained programme of investment as part of an active industrial strategy. Alongside this, Labour will need a coherent, long-term plan for skills. The experience of recent decades shows that public and private investment must go hand-in-hand to accelerate the delivery of energy infrastructure, develop domestic supply chains, and create high quality jobs here in the UK, making the just transition a reality.

Great British Energy, Labour's planned public energy generation company, should invest and coinvest in a wide range of technologies needed to decarbonise the energy system, focusing on those areas where strategic public intervention can unlock private finance. Britain's new nuclear programme must be a priority. Experts

including the Climate Change Committee and International Energy Agency consistently recognise that nuclear has a central role in delivering net zero. Renewables will do the heavy lifting of delivering a clean energy system, but we need reliable sources of baseload energy to complement their variable output.

Nuclear is the UK's only proven technology offering a constant supply of zero-carbon electricity at scale. Beyond power generation, it opens up possibilities to decarbonise other parts of the economy by producing clean hydrogen, industrial heat, synthetic fuels, and more. Nuclear is also a growth engine for the economy, supporting more than 75,000 high-skilled, well-paid, largely unionised jobs in communities up and down the country (including many of the constituencies Labour is targeting at the general election).

Yet just as we should be ramping up our output, years of inconsistent policy have left us with a dwindling nuclear sector. All but one of our existing reactors are due to retire by the end of the decade. Delays in constructing Hinkley Point C and getting a financing package for Sizewell C over the line risk leaving the UK with a growing clean energy generation gap, while leaving workers and communities uncertain about the future.

The current government has ambitious nuclear targets, aiming to deliver up to 24GW of capacity by 2050, but has consistently failed to back these up with concrete action. In the two years since it announced Great British Nuclear to deliver new projects, the public body has been repeatedly revised and delayed, undermining the clarity and consistency that industry needs.

Labour has rightly committed to delivering Hinkley Point C and Sizewell C, extending the life of existing reactors where safe to do so and backing further new nuclear projects including technologies such as small modular reactors. Building on these pledges, a Labour government should adopt a clear roadmap for the rollout of large-scale, small modular, and advanced reactors, while unblocking barriers such as siting, financing, supply chains, and skills.

In doing so, Labour should embrace the breadth and depth of our nuclear expertise.

From fission and fusion research to nuclear fuel fabrication and engineering to decommissioning, the UK has world-leading strengths with significant export potential in a growing global market.

Keir Starmer's mission-driven approach is a chance to finally turn bold promises into reality. There is no national challenge more urgent than building a clean, reliable, and affordable energy system that supports good jobs around the country. After several false starts on Britain's nuclear renaissance, the next Labour government must finally deliver results. **F**

Sue Ferns is senior deputy general secretary at Prospect



A CRUCIAL MISSION

Labour cannot ignore victims of the sex trade — *Farah Hussain*

Labour has promised that five bold missions will form the backbone of its election manifesto and drive the work of the next Labour government. As part of one of them, the mission to 'take back our streets', it has pledged to halve levels of violence against women and girls within a decade. After 14 years of cuts to local government budgets which fund many local support services, numerous high-profile cases of violence against women, and the de facto decriminalisation of rape, this is welcome news. However, to enact the systemic and cultural change needed to protect women and girls, Labour must include tackling the sex trade as part of its mission.

Prostitution is a cause and consequence of gender inequality in our society. It is caused by enduring power differences between men and women and works to perpetuate these same dynamics. Sex buyers are overwhelmingly male, with 11 per cent of men in the UK saying that they have paid for sex with money,

compared to less than one per cent of women. Home Office research found that the profile of a sex buyer is “a man of around 30 years of age, married, in full time employment, with no criminal convictions”. They are usually men with the means and ability to access women with less social capital than them, making prostitution inherently exploitative.

For far too long, successive governments have ignored the reality of the sex trade, but the evidence is clear: violence is widespread in both indoor and street prostitution. In Canada and the UK, 62 to 65 per cent of killings of women in prostitution are committed by sex buyers. A Home Office report estimated that a victim of sex trafficking spends a median of 274 days in sexual exploitation, with each individual experiencing an average of 795 counts of rape and other forms of sexual assault during that time. Between 1990 and 2009, at least 137 women involved in the sex trade were murdered and women in street prostitution are 12 times more likely to be murdered than all women in the same age group. There is no question that prostitution is violence, and it should be addressed as such by any government, but especially a Labour government committed to addressing violence against women and girls.

Our current laws are not fit for purpose. The act of buying sex is legal but many acts associated with are not, including soliciting.

This offence targets those exploited in the sex trade (mostly women) and the National Police Chiefs’ Council recently fought for convictions for this crime to stay on the criminal record of individuals until they are 100, in case they apply to join positions which require the “upmost integrity”, including the judiciary and the police. Sex buyers, on the other hand, very rarely find themselves in court for ‘kerb crawling’ or even for buying sex from someone subject to force. A recent Home Affairs Committee inquiry found that between 2013 and 2020, only three people were convicted under this law, and the maximum fine received was £50 – £50 for sexually abusing a victim of sex trafficking.

The next Labour government will not have to look far to find out how to tackle this form of exploitation. Sweden provides over two decades worth of evidence on how an approach that tackles demand for prostitution while supporting victims can work to reduce the size of the sex trade. In 1999, the country criminalised paying for sex while decriminalising selling sex. This was designed to deter men from buying sex and to enable victims of exploitation to come forward, access support and rebuild their lives once they are ready to do so. More recently, and even closer to home, Ireland, Northern Ireland and France have implemented similar laws, along with Norway, Israel and Iceland. Even Germany, once dubbed the

“brothel of Europe” has indicated that it will change its policy towards prostitution.

Keir Starmer has said that he will halve violence against women and girls because everyone has a right to live free from fear. This is a laudable aim, but it must include all women, including those affected by the sex trade. **F**

Farah Hussain is the director of UK Feminista. She was a Labour councillor in the London Borough of Redbridge from 2014 to 2022



CLEANING UP

Getting a handle on fraud and corruption is essential —
Susan Hawley

Rachel Reeves’ announcement that Labour will introduce a ‘Covid Corruption Commissioner’ has turned out to be a real crowd-pleaser – and with good reason. With £7.3bn lost to fraud in Covid business support schemes and £2.7bn of PPE contracts where the government has potentially failed to get value for money, this is a weak spot for the government. On top of Reeves’ announcement, Keir Starmer’s “crackdown on cronyism” speech in the new year trailed tougher sentences of more than 10 years for people who defraud the public purse.

For those with a keen interest in tackling corruption and fraud, this focus is welcome. With fraud against the government costing £21bn in the past two years alone, failing to get a grip on corruption is costing us serious sums of money that could be invested in public services.

But whoever forms the next government will need more than headlines to win back the public’s trust – they will need a full and well-rounded plan to get results.

First: why stop at Covid corruption? The idea of an anti-corruption and fraud commissioner – to examine public contracts, bring agencies together and provide leadership of a fragmented system, and to hold government agencies to account for recovering funds and tackling corruption and fraud – is a good one. And with two-thirds of losses from fraud against the government



over the past two years stemming from causes other than Covid, a broader remit could increase the potential gains.

The danger is that that limiting a new commissioner's remit to Covid corruption will make it a hostage to fortune. Recoveries from Covid fraud so far have been mixed – just £525m (11 per cent) of the £5bn lost in three HMRC-run Covid-related schemes; £21m (1.9 per cent) of £1.1bn lost through Covid small business grants; and £7.3m (0.4 per cent) of £1.7bn lost through the Covid bounce back loan scheme. There are legitimate questions as to how much of the missing billions can still realistically be recovered.

Second, tougher sentencing can't happen without more stringent fraud and corruption laws and – even more critically – robust enforcement.

On the legislative front, a specific offence of fraud and corruption against the public purse would be an excellent place to start. But other crucial legislative fixes are needed. Extending the new 'failure to prevent' fraud offence beyond large organisations would ensure smaller businesses are encouraged to put in place vital anti-fraud procedures, making them reliable partners for government contracts – vital for a fairer procurement system.

Meanwhile, as the country waits to see if details of the Baroness Mone scandal will see the light of day in court when the National Crime Agency investigation concludes, many of the other PPE scandals are unlikely to make the bar for an investigation to even start. The UK doesn't have laws to prevent trading in influence or abuse of office – having opted out of requirements under international anti-corruption conventions to do so. So a revamp of our legislative framework for tackling corruption within our own borders is critical.

The hardest nut to crack, however, will be the UK's chronic under-performance on enforcement – a likely root cause for why the UK has so far failed to recover more funds lost to Covid fraud. The US, which has a strong enforcement record, provides a stark contrast: by August last year, it had already recovered over \$1.4bn of assets and issued criminal charges against over 3,100 defendants in pandemic-related investigations.

Tackling the UK's enforcement problem should be at the top of a new commissioner's in-tray. The next government should reinvest more of the assets that these agencies recover, in order to build their technological capabilities and long-term skills and expertise.

The gains to be had from doing so are immense, with a virtuous circle of reinvestment bringing ever more recovery.

Third, prevention is king. Labour is right to talk about hard-wiring anti-fraud and corruption measures into public spending and grants. Using and beefing up powers under the soon to be implemented Procurement Act to prevent bad actors and poor performers getting contracts will prevent losses and deter companies from defrauding the public purse. And ramping up whistleblower protection with generous compensation is another surefire way to prevent wrongdoing, with a 2020 US study showing such schemes resulted in deterrence worth \$18bn over five years.

Any new government's measures on fraud against the public purse will ultimately be measured in pounds and prosecutions. While politicians have talked tough on fraud, the test will be whether they follow through with policies that deliver. **F**

Dr Susan Hawley is executive director of Spotlight on Corruption, a UK charity that explores the UK's role in corruption at home and abroad



CRISIS POINT

Overstretched renters need more state support — *Sem Moema*

The social contract used to be a point of consensus – with a key tenet being that since each of us could go through periods of hardship, we should not condemn those who have been unlucky to a life of suffering. But since 2010, that social contract has been strained almost to breaking point, with housing support now perhaps the most overstretched part of the welfare state.

This is certainly the case in London, where I am an assembly member. Our city is in the midst of a severe housing crisis. Homelessness in London has risen by 23 per cent over the past year. More than 60,000 households here live in temporary accommodation, used by councils for those needing emergency support. Sadly, such accommodation is frequently not so temporary; thousands end up staying there

for years, costing councils £60m every single month.

The underlying cause is a lack of social housing. More than 300,000 council homes have been sold off across London since Thatcher introduced the right to buy, and the process is ongoing: from 2021–2022, 1,864 more houses were sold through the scheme. Each home was once a community asset that served vulnerable people. Now, 42 per cent of houses bought through right to buy are rented out privately, with tenants paying more than twice as much as when homes were owned by local authorities.

The paper-thin provision of social housing means that the vulnerable and low-paid are pushed into the private rented sector. Government support does not meet their costs, so these families are often going without food, toiletries or heating just to afford their rent.

To change the situation, we need three things. First, local housing allowance must match the costs of those forced to rent privately but unable to pay for it through work. That should mean regular re-evaluations of the appropriate level of support in each area. LHA is meant to cover rents up to the 30th percentile of an area's properties, but the Conservatives froze it from 2019 until autumn 2023, a time during which private rents grew substantially.

Along with other Labour activists, I campaigned for them to raise it. After months of pressure, the government was forced to concede, moving LHA back in line with the 30th percentile metric in their autumn statement in 2023. But this is only a temporary solution – LHA is set to be frozen again from 2025 as part of a cruel and inefficient stop-start cycle which means we will have to campaign again and again for LHA to meet real housing costs.

Second, universal credit must reflect the costs of essentials, and this should be guaranteed by government. I support the Trussell Trust's campaign for an essentials guarantee. The current low level of universal credit means those forced to rely on benefits have to cross-subsidise their costs – taking money from LHA to pay for food, for example, and getting into rent arrears as a result; or the reverse, using universal credit to cover rent. In the worst cases, people are forced into debt to pay for basic goods – or even go without them.

Third, we must build more social housing. The mayor of London's affordable housing programme is providing new council and social housing for social rent. It is giving more and more Londoners

somewhere affordable to live, with the mayor building more than 23,000 council homes since launching the Building Council Homes for Londoners programme in 2018. But the gap we are trying to plug is immense. Years of underinvestment mean that, while Sadiq Khan is building more council housing than at any point since the 1970s, thousands of Londoners are still under housing stress. Depressingly low levels of affordable housebuilding under Boris Johnson meant that the gap between supply and demand had been growing even before Brexit; since, our supply chains and labour market have become so unstable that at times the housebuilding sector was severely under threat. And the mayor's investment has been against a backdrop of rising poverty, leaving more people needing support for housing costs.

Following the Tories' 2022 mini-budget, economic chaos made it harder than ever to get on with building. Since that autumn, the cost of materials, the availability of workers and our supply chains have all been decimated. In fact, costs have risen so much that we need an additional £470m of funding to get the programme back on track.

Housing is one of the basics. Without somewhere to live, no one in our community can pursue education, work, healthcare or a social life. High housing costs subject the poorest among us to lives of misery and deprivation. These issues must be addressed urgently. **F**

Sem Moema is a Labour GLA member for Hackney, Islington and Waltham Forest and the chair of London Labour Housing Group



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SEEING RED

Public anger isn't subsiding anytime soon. Labour should embrace it —
Iggy Wood

Keir Starmer is really very annoyed — no, hang on, more than annoyed. He's irked. Or perhaps there's no point in beating around the bush, not when it's plain to see. The man is cheesed off.

Meanwhile, the public is apoplectic; the government is almost certainly one of the most hated in the modern era. Yet Labour seem committed to 'disagreeing agreeably.' Why is Labour unwilling to tap into such a rich seam of rage?

It is true that political anger can harm the most vulnerable in our society, with women, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and racialised people bearing the brunt, whether at an interpersonal level or through government policy. At the extreme end, the spectre of violence also looms large personally for MPs. So a degree of wariness is sensible. Yet the party's unwillingness to draw on specifically anti-establishment anger is more plausibly the result of a commitment to 'serious politics' and an instinctive reluctance to do anything that could be construed as populist. The problem is that public anger is not going away any time soon, because people know that they are right to be angry. Any doubt can be assuaged simply by looking at the country around them.

An obvious rejoinder would be that Labour has achieved a 20-point lead precisely through equivocation. Starmer himself has tried to convince us that "It's time for Mr Boring." But that simply does not fit with the lessons of the past decade, and it is very difficult to evaluate Labour's current communications strategy with any confidence when both the Conservatives and the SNP have self-destructed in such dramatic fashion.

More importantly, the day Labour takes office, it will become the obvious target for the deep well of anger that has accumulated. How Labour campaigns in the general election will dictate how it is able to adapt to this new reality. Ideally, it would be able to

portray itself as something of an insurgent government, battling vested interests and a ruling class grown used to power. Its proposal to abolish the VAT exemption on private school fees is a good example of how popular soak-the-rich policies can be. But so far, Labour has invested considerable energy in portraying itself as the sensible wing of a British establishment that is hated. On forming a government, it risks being almost immediately recast from an instrument of popular anger to the object of it.

At a minimum, Labour must tell people who is to blame for the state we find ourselves in. Frontbenchers should be talking about Michele Mone and Doug Barrowman in the same way the Daily Mail talks about people on benefits — phrases such as 'fat-cat scroungers', 'workshy trust-fund leeches', and 'toffee-nosed wide boys' suggest themselves. Apart from anything else, such language would get press coverage, but unlike Angela Rayner's 'Tory scum' comment, it could not be interpreted as an attack on voters Labour need to win over. It would instead target a universally disliked archetype: the wealthy crook.

This would be a difficult shift for Labour to make. Much internal discussion in recent years has been about 'beating populism', with the basic blueprint being: 'enter government and substantially improve people's standard of living.' But that might take a decade or more — almost certainly more than one term. In the meantime, the plan seems to be to refuse to acknowledge, and certainly not participate in, the growing outrage among many different shades of voter since 2008. The idea is that such emotion is not befitting of a government-in-waiting: power, not protest is the refrain.

This wilful disregard of the national mood and an obsessive, compensatory focus on 'public opinion' about various policy issues partly accounts for the failure of very experienced political operators to predict the Brexit vote in 2016, or Labour's surprisingly good performance under Jeremy Corbyn in 2017. But there is no need to embrace anti-EU sentiment or commit to a four-day week in order to tap into people's disillusionment. It is much more about sounding genuinely angry — ideally, being genuinely angry — and offering up an appropriate target for public ire. Not that policy has no role to play; one easy, small win already mooted by Labour would be expanding the fox-hunting ban after recent instances of rule-breaking. This policy area offers particularly good

opportunities for righteous anger; the only thing British voters hate more than the establishment is animal cruelty.

It would be nice to live in a country where we really could ‘disagree agreeably’. But to do so today is to minimise the scale of suffering right across the working and middle classes. The frontbench should be blunt, and, where appropriate, outright belligerent; the British people need to know that Labour is in their corner. **F**

Iggy Wood is the assistant editor of the Fabian Review



WINDS OF CHANGE

Social democracy must renew itself again — *Eunice Goes*

Now should be a time of soul-searching for European social democrats. In many places around Europe, representatives of the centre-left have found themselves losing ground to a resurgent and increasingly radical right. Their response has often been somewhat passive. But this is far from the first challenge social democracy has faced in Europe, and it is worth situating the current acute difficulties in the broader context of history.

In my new book, I trace the transformation of European social democracy since its emergence in the mid-19th century until current times. Drawing on the work of the political scientist Adam Przeworski, the central thesis of the book is that social democracy is a variety of socialism, one that has metamorphosed over its 160 years of history as a result of dialectical interplay between doctrinal commitments to a socialist vision of society and the implications of pursuing those goals through parliamentary democracy.

The story of social democracy in Europe unfolded over four distinct acts. The first was characterised by heated debates about the end goals of social democracy. While Marx and Engels, as well as the resolutions of the Second International, made the emancipation of the proletariat in a socialist society their goal, social democrats debated whether equality or fraternity might

be more appropriate cardinal goals for socialism – and whether these goals could be achieved in a capitalist society. But the first big and divisive debate was about democracy and revolution. Following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, social democracy became an ideology and practice that only applied to those who pursued socialism via the parliamentary road. If there would be a revolution, this one would be either led democratically by the workers’ movement at some time in the future and it would be carried out “by peaceful, legal, and moral means” as Kautsky suggested. This stance contrasted with the vanguard rule defended by the Bolsheviks.

Social democrats disagreed too about the role of the state in the economy. Thus, the second act was defined by disputes about social democracy’s accommodation with capitalism. The seeds of discord were sown in the early 20th century by Eduard Bernstein’s revisionism, but differences of opinion only became a doctrinal point in the late 1950s. In the meantime, social democrats muddled through the Great Depression of the 1930s and postwar reconstruction by occasionally accepting the orthodoxies of modern capitalist economies, but in most cases by reforming capitalism.

This process of accommodation also included innovative approaches to the economy that radically transformed the character of capitalism. Sweden’s SAP was the first social democratic party to experiment with economic policies that prioritised full employment and social justice. Soon other parties copied or adapted this approach.

By the 1950s, capitalism was a much tamer beast. In many European countries, governments had nationalised key economic assets, created and developed robust welfare states, promoted full employment and heavily taxed private profits and top incomes. This was a type of capitalism social democrats could use to achieve socialist ends.

The third act of social democracy was triggered by the economic problems that beset this ‘tamed capitalism’ in the 1950s and 1960s. The collapse of the Bretton Woods international financial system, the oil shocks of the 1970s, and persistent ‘stagflation’ called into question the validity of the social democratic formula “Keynesianism plus welfare state”. Slowly but surely, social democrats started to accept, as Sheri Berman argued, the primacy of markets over politics. Accepting that globalisation could not be challenged



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or redirected towards other goals, social democratic programmes focused instead in creating the conditions for more economic growth, offering remedial solutions to poverty and preparing workers to compete in the global capitalist economy.

But without realising it, social democratic parties were reversing the reforms that had made the acceptance of capitalism not only possible, but doctrinally compatible with the goals of social democracy. Thus the third act changed not only the means but also the ends of social democracy.

The fourth act of social democracy has seen social democrats attempt to come to terms with the consequences of their acceptance of the primacy of markets. In this ongoing fourth act, social democrats have been mostly disorientated. The global financial crisis and the Eurozone crisis left them, once more, without an economic policy. Thus, without a clear roadmap to navigate the many crises that followed, social democrats have alternated between muddling through, proposing a bit of higher spending here, a technocratic intervention there, and searching for ambitious and transformative solutions which could renew the social democratic creed. This sense of disorientation means that, for now, the future of social democracy seems uncertain. It is up to the agents and defenders of social democracy to decide whether to write its obituary or renew and reset its mission for the challenges of the future. **F**

Dr Eunice Goes is professor of politics at Richmond American University London. Social Democracy is published by Agenda Publishing

Onwards and upwards

The Fabian Society is celebrating its 140th anniversary this year. To mark the occasion, the Fabian Review asked Fabians past and present for their views on the role it has played

Fabianism in government

Keir Starmer MP

In the 140 years since the Fabian Society was founded, it has driven the fight for justice, progress and equality. To that end, Fabians and Fabian principles have always been at the heart of the proudest moments in Labour's history – building a new Britain out of collective sacrifice in 1945; modernising an economy left behind by technological change in 1964; renewing a crumbling public realm in 1997.

Today, the Labour party looks towards a future with challenges both new and familiar, determined to achieve the long-term change desperately needed to transform the lives of working people. I hope and know that the Fabians will be alongside us again in our mission for a decade of national renewal. **F**

Keir Starmer is the Labour MP for Holborn and St Pancras and the leader of the Labour party



Sadiq Khan

At this milestone, we recall what binds us as Fabians. We believe in the power to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish alone. We are reminded that our tradition succeeds when we are proud and progressive, when we look to the past for inspiration and approach the future with optimism.

We remember how the early Fabians were among the first to champion the universal right to a living wage, treatment when sick and a secure income when disabled or aged. And how those principles became policies when a transformational Labour government – led by a member of our society, Clement Attlee – emerged from the ruins of war.

I joined the Fabian Society 30 years ago because its values reflected my own. As mayor, those values have been the foundation on which I have governed. Our forebears maintained the cause of nourishing our children – and from City Hall, we have now fulfilled that commitment. For the first time ever in London, every child in a state primary, on every school day can sit down with their classmates and share a nutritious meal. Universal free school meals prove that while our society is 140 years old, the ideals on which it was fashioned still hold the power to improve lives.

Let us make this anniversary year one to remember – with City Hall, a host of Whitehall departments and 10 Downing Street all occupied by Fabians. And together, in the true spirit of Fabianism, let us strive to do better than the generation that came before and leave something better for the one after. **F**

Sadiq Khan is the mayor of London

The Fabian Society: personal journeys

Stella Creasy MP

Nearly 30 years ago, I exploded with delight at being asked to make a cup of tea for Neil Kinnock. I found a phone box, rang my mum and dad and told them why being the first Fabian intern was the best choice I had ever made, even though it meant moving to London, taking terrible temp jobs – the post was unpaid – and learning to read the tube map. If you received a Fabian mailout in 1996 with blood from a papercut on it, chances are it was stuffed by me in the dark of the Cole Room whilst reading back issues of the Fabian Review. I loved every minute of my time answering the phone – even the day Paul Richards’ pamphlet declared we should become a republic and we were inundated with calls demanding all of us be sent to the tower for treason.

The Fabians were at the heart of bringing together those who would form the 1997 government – as I added milk and sugar to those cups of tea I listened to Chris Smith, John Reid and Robin Cook argue, I met a young David Miliband and an even younger James Purnell, and even managed to dance with Mo Mowlam at party conference. Simon Crine, Glenys Thornton, Giles Wright, Deborah Stoate, Ian Corfield, Stephen Twigg, Clair Wilcox, Stephen Pollard and Tina Howes, who held the place together, each displayed boundless kindness and patience when dealing with an overexcited 18 year old soaking up their shared passion for social justice and organising conferences.

To a man and woman, everyone who walked through the door of Dartmouth Street was determined to achieve a Labour government – and determined that it should change the course of history. To be there provided a political education second to none. Now, three decades later, technological progress means interns to stuff envelopes are no longer needed; but the value of such a political space endures. Here’s to the next 140 years. **F**

Stella Creasy is the Labour MP for Walthamstow

Sara Hyde

It is an honour to chair the Fabian Society as we celebrate our 140th anniversary and at this exciting time for the Labour movement. Much of my political journey has been shaped by the Fabians and especially Fabian Women’s Network (FWN). A decade ago, I was a Labour party member whose activism mostly manifested in feminist organising and frontline work in prisons and in my local community. But then I joined the Fabians and accepted a place on the FWN mentoring scheme, which was a life-changing experience. With the expert guidance of Caroline Adams and Christine Megson, and mentored by Diana Johnson MP, I quickly grew to understand the

opportunities for change for the communities I cared most about through structural, political means, and through thoughtful, evidence-based policies and ideas.

I joined the FWN committee and was able to learn from an array of impressive women, including FWN’s founder, Seema Malhotra MP. They were patient with this political neophyte, nurturing my evolution into a policy person and, ultimately, politician. I would not have stood for the London Assembly, parliament or council without these sisters championing me. I have met lifelong friends here who keep me accountable to the FWN principles of sisterhood, solidarity and service. Thank you to the Fabians and to FWN for shaping me and for being the home of brilliant, world-changing ideas and the future of the left since 1884. Happy anniversary. **F**

Sara Hyde is chair of the Fabian Society and a former chair of Fabian Women’s Network

Vince Cable

People may not see Liberal Democrats and Fabians as natural bedfellows – or perhaps they do – but I am indebted to the Fabian Society for the intellectual stimulus it provided when I was a member and for helping those of us on the centre-left to debate and sort out our ideas.

The late 60s and 70s were a period of political ferment on the left. The two Wilson governments had created high expectations of change in Britain’s ossified institutions and sluggish economy, and then disillusionment when the change was underwhelming. Britain’s future was defined as European. Conservative social values were being displaced by liberal ones. Britain was facing up to a future of racial diversity and divisive debates about immigration. Trades unions were sufficiently powerful to be able to cause great disruption, but were in structural decline along with manufacturing industry. A younger generation was caught up in idealistic and angry debates about South Africa and Vietnam.

The Fabian Society was a great place to debate these big issues. Argument was tolerant and opinions eclectic. Some of the best minds in the Labour government came to conferences to engage and argue. It was tragic when the wave of militancy sweeping through the party in the late 70s led to the schism and the creation of the SDP. Fabians, I recall, were deeply split and there was a move, unfortunately unsuccessful, to act as a bridge between divided social democrats.

My two Fabian pamphlets – one on Kenyan Asian immigration; one on (and against) import controls, protectionism and the Alternative Economic Strategy – are amongst the publications I am proudest of. **F**

Sir Vince Cable is the former leader of the Liberal Democrats

The Fabian Society's place in the labour movement

David Blunkett

When I was a student at the University of Sheffield, one of my tutors was Royden Harrison, professor of history. After he moved to Warwick – where his reputation blossomed – I kept in touch with him and his wife Pauline (they retained their home in Sheffield). On many occasions I had a very pleasant evening meal with them, though they often felt more like a tutorial – and when I was in government, an inquisition!

Royden later took on the task of writing a biography of Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who formed the core of the early Fabian Society. To the outside observer, Fabianism, and therefore the Fabian Society, was a euphemism for gradualism. Yet, as one of the three strands that led to the establishment of the Labour party, and which still shapes the British left today, it was much more than that.

The Social Democratic Federation, the craft trade unions and the Fabian strand of social democracy blended together. The first – contrary to its name – was, of course, Marxist. The second represented the practical implementation of the struggle of Labour to counteract exploitation and to give a voice to workers. But Fabian discussion and analysis was the educative core and, in many ways, the moral voice, arguing for the values of equality, mutuality and reciprocity which so desperately need shoring up today.

On this anniversary, it's worth reflecting on the tension, so common on the left-of-centre, between nostalgia for a bygone era and the stark reality of modern challenges, and how the Fabian Society has navigated this tension in the past. Historically, partly because of the influence of Sidney Webb, the Fabian Society was seen as promoting the 'big state', taken up in the post-second world war era by Herbert Morrison, and a top-down approach to both nationalisation and the welfare state. Yet over 40 years ago, I, together with Professor Geoff Green (now at Sheffield Hallam University), wrote a small Fabian pamphlet called *Building from the Bottom*. It was the Fabian Society which gave us voice to describe the 'Third Way' long before Anthony Giddens coined the phrase in the 1990s. ■

David Blunkett is a Labour peer. He served as Home Secretary, Education Secretary and Work and Pensions Secretary under Tony Blair

Kirsty McNeill

The Fabian Society has sometimes been characterised as the home of 'pamphlet' Labour, a place for thinkers and theorists who hold themselves apart – perhaps even aloof – from 'leaflet Labour', the tribe concerned with the nuts and bolts of winning elections. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I used my speech at the Fabian new year conference in January to call time on this damaging distinction.

Our Fabian predecessors helped form the Labour party precisely because the redistribution of power to working people through parliamentary means was their ultimate objective, both ethically and strategically. In joining forces with the trade unions, we created the greatest fighting force for fairness this country has ever known, and we have been combining the politics of ideas and the politics of organisation ever since.

Over the last 140 years, this bilateral partnership with the trade union movement has become ever more porous. We have also learnt from and incorporated a plethora of other progressive traditions including feminism, environmentalism and the co-operative movement. While we must constantly be adapting to new times and new trends, one thing has remained unchanged since the society's formation: as Fabians, it is our privilege but also our obligation not just to generate policies but to get out there and fight for them. That is how we will make 2024 a year that our Fabian forebears would be proud of – and that will inspire those who follow us. I look forward to seeing many of my fellow Fabians on the campaign trail in the months to come.

*Kirsty McNeill is the Labour parliamentary candidate for Midlothian. Her pamphlet, *Counter Culture: How to Resist the Culture Wars and Build 21st Century Solidarity*, co-written with Roger Harding, was published by the Fabian Society in 2021*

Reaching across the UK

Anas Sarwar MSP

2024 could not be more critical for Scotland and for Scottish Labour. We face the most important general election in a generation. The SNP say they want to send a message to Westminster – we want to send a government. This is our chance to deliver the change that Scotland needs.

Scottish Fabians research last year showed that not only does Scotland have a crucial role to play in delivering a Labour government, but that the answers to how we renew and revive Labour’s appeal across the UK lie in Scotland – “the first red wall to fall”.

This year is our opportunity to send Scottish MPs to Westminster who will sit at the heart of a Labour administration. The Fabian Society and the Scottish Fabians have been crucial to making this possible by turning Scottish Labour back into a party of government.

As the Fabian Society celebrates its 140th year, the Scottish Parliament will celebrate 25 years. A quarter of a century from when our party created the Scottish Parliament, our opponents have failed to make it work for the people of Scotland.

We have come a long way, but there is still much work to do. The election is on a knife-edge. It will take all our activists working hard to get these seats over the line. I know I can rely on Scottish Fabian members to get out and fight for our shared values.

A Labour government will be an opportunity to reset devolution and take it back to its founding principles. Devolution was always meant to be about Scottish solutions to Scottish problems. It was always meant to be about empowering local communities. It was never meant to be an end in itself but a means to an end – a fairer, more equal society. I know that the Fabian Society shares this vision, and I look forward to working with it to deliver the change that Scotland needs. **F**

Anas Sarwar is the leader of Scottish Labour

LJ Davies

Politics affects us all, but much of its infrastructure is heavily concentrated in London. Right from the start, however, we at the Fabian Society have had a presence across the United Kingdom in the form of our local societies. Local Fabian societies provide a space for people on the left to meet and debate political issues and how they affect their local communities.

Each local society is different. Some focus on local government issues and act as a thinktank for their area. Some provide a forum for discussion of national issues. Some are small, others large, with bigger branches having more than 100 members. Many are affiliated to their local Labour party units and feed policy expertise and ideas into their constituency structures. All of them contribute to Fabian traditions and our reach across the country.

The local societies are part of what makes the Fabians special, and after a difficult period during the pandemic they are going from strength to strength. You can find details of local societies near you on the Fabian website – or contact our local societies convenor if you’re interested in setting one up and taking Fabian ideas into the future throughout the country. **F**

LJ Davies is the local societies representative on the Fabian Society’s executive committee and a Labour & Co-operative councillor for Smethwick



Confronting a chequered past

Faridah Zaman

In February 1900, the playwright and Fabian Society luminary George Bernard Shaw delivered arguably the clearest articulation of the relationship between Fabianism and imperialism. “Every Fabian,” Shaw told the audience at a large public meeting, “was necessarily an Imperialist.” His reasoning was that Fabianism and imperialism were both based on “a sense of the supreme importance of the Duties of Community, with State Organisation, Efficient Government, Industrial Civil Service, Regulation of all private enterprise in the common interest, and dissolution of Frontiers through international industrial organisation.” ‘Imperial Federation,’ the thinking went, was the only practical vehicle for promoting these concepts and overcoming the narrow conceits of national self-interest.

One might already sense some tension between this broad, expansive vision of imperialism and the liberal and progressive tradition which birthed the Fabian Society, which was committed to championing gradualist reform through local, voluntarist and, above all, cooperative institutions. For many Fabians of this period, however, there was no contradiction: political and social progress was best achieved by incorporating more of the world into a political entity with Fabian ideals, rather than profit, at its heart. Fabians of the early 20th century were thus “socialist imperialists”: consistent advocates of a better form of empire rather than for a (scarcely imaginable) world without empire at all.

The acceleration of anticolonial movements across the British Empire in the mid-20th century made clear that a world without empire was not only imaginable but impending. Fabians, along with much of the British establishment, were slow to adjust. The Fabian Colonial Bureau, founded in 1940 by Rita Hinden and Arthur Creech Jones, worked expeditiously to promote colonial welfare and ‘development,’ and achieved a significant degree of influence when Labour came to power in 1945. While this period saw a deeper Fabian engagement with the spirit of cooperation, and colonial subjects began to be recognised as independent agents of change, for the most part, paternalism proved resilient.

Notably, this period saw some future postcolonial leaders drawn to Fabianism (with newly independent states such as India prioritising Fabian-inspired central planning over individual freedoms). Yet for the most part, Fabians approached the myriad challenges in Britain’s colonies through the tools they knew best: research, committees, and countless reports recommending gradual reform. From the vantage point of the present, it is salient to remember how often seemingly benign ideas, such as progress, efficiency, and development, can sustain forms of illiberalism – and that sometimes, gradual reform just isn’t quick enough. ■

Faridah Zaman is associate professor of the history of Britain and the world at the University of Oxford

Chris Renwick

In 1883, in his book *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development*, Francis Galton – Charles Darwin’s cousin – coined a word to describe a project he’d been working on since the early 1860s. Derived from the Greek word *eugenes*, meaning “good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities”, “eugenics” was the name for a programme for human and social improvement that Galton hoped would transform politics. The following year, the Fabian Society was founded. The proximity of these two events was no coincidence.

By the first decade of the 20th century, eugenics was a mainstream topic in Britain, discussed openly by the press, politicians, social reformers, and the intellectual class. Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw were just two examples of early Fabians who wrote about eugenics during these years, ranging from worries about a declining birthrate leading to depopulation to the kinds of crude concerns about “stock” that we might today associate with the movement. The fact the early Fabians – and they were not alone on the left – should be interested in eugenics should be no surprise. The society and its founders considered themselves to be modern, scientific,

and forward-facing. Though we might struggle to see it now, primarily because we know where it would head in the middle decades of the 20th century, this was also how eugenicists liked to see their work.

The intersection of Fabian socialism and eugenics was complicated. To be sure, some Fabians were drawn to ideas about ridding Britain of any number of groups they held a prejudice against. For others, however, including influential members of the Fabian Society and academics at the London School of Economics, which the society had founded to spread their ideas, eugenics meant something different: a way to show how inefficient social structures, like barriers to educational advancement, stood in the way of working-class potential being realised – an issue for both individual aspiration and the country’s management of its human capital. In this sense, eugenics’ attraction for the early Fabians is something we cannot overlook, not least because it reveals the ethical and political complexities that have featured in the effort to root social reform within modern values and scientific insight. ■

Chris Renwick is professor of modern history at the University of York

The Fabian Society and young people

Michael Crick

I first joined the Young Fabian executive in 1978 when I was still at Oxford. My abiding memory is of the young Peter Mandelson, then a 25-year-old ITV producer. He diligently sat through our rather tedious meetings, always accompanying Jenny Jeger, a future chair of the society – rather naively, I wondered if Jenny was Peter’s girlfriend. Yet, curiously, he scarcely uttered a word. So why bother? Simple. He needed us to nominate him as our rep on the British Youth Council, where Mandelson served as national chairman for a few years, one of the first steps in his long ascent to influence.

If the Young Fabians were helping to sow the seeds of the Third Way, we were no less buffeted by the turmoil that preceded it. As chair of the Young Fabians from 1980–81, I found myself sitting on the national Fabian executive just as Labour’s civil war expanded to the society. After the party’s 1979 election defeat, two prominent members of the Callaghan Cabinet – Tony Benn and Shirley Williams – had been elected to the Fabian executive, and all the acrimony of Labour’s time in office, fuelled further by a bitter postmortem, spilled over into proceedings at Fabian HQ, then housed on Dartmouth Street. Benn – a former chairman of the society – was at the peak of his power, successfully steering Labour to the left, while Williams – a former Fabian general secretary – was openly thinking about leaving the party to join Roy Jenkins and others in the proposed SDP. I witnessed first-hand how unpleasant the two sides were to each other in executive meetings – even such normally courteous characters as Benn and Williams. One point of contention was that Williams and her allies wanted people who defected to the new party to be allowed to remain as Fabian members, partly as a possible

route to reconciliation between the two parties in the long term. But allowing members of a rival party to remain in full Fabian membership was clearly untenable given the society’s affiliation to the Labour party.

For me, the highlight of the Young Fabian calendar was the yearly summer school. In 1976, the 34-year-old Neil Kinnock directed the school over a very hot weekend at Sheffield University, accompanied by his wife Glenys and their two young children, Stephen and Rachel. I had never met Kinnock before, but he was easily identifiable as a future star – friendly, engaging, intelligent, and full of stories, insights and naughty gossip. When I returned to my local Labour branch in Stockport I proposed we should vote for him in that year’s NEC elections. “Who’s Neil Kinnock?” they asked.

My favourite YF anecdote, though, doesn’t involve me, starring instead my daughter Catherine, who in November 2008, aged 20, went on a YF trip to Ohio to help the Obama election campaign. On their third day they discovered – almost too late – that Obama was due to address a huge rally downtown. By the time they arrived it was packed to the rafters with people who’d been waiting in line for hours, but the organisers were so impressed by these ‘young Brits’ that they found them a row of seats on the stage itself, underneath where Obama was due to speak. Not only did they get a close-up view of the great orator in full flow, but after the cheers and razzmatazz, Barack and his wife Michelle went along the line of Young Fabians greeting Catherine and the others one by one. Two days later, boosted no doubt by this encounter, Obama was elected president.

Happy days. ■

Michael Crick is a journalist and author. He was political editor of Newsnight and political correspondent at Channel 4 News. He currently runs the Tomorrow’s MPs social media account

Eli Harris

If you are reading this article, there is a strong chance that you have seen the artwork titled *The Worker’s Maypole* by Walter Crane, published in 1894. In this illustration, men and women dance around a maypole, with ribbons inscribed with slogans such as “Leisure for all”, “No starving children”, and “Employers’ liability”. The most often-referenced banner is the one reading “The Cause of Labour is the Hope of the World”. The drawing – published a decade before the Fabian Society was founded – captures the swelling urgency in Victorian Britain to challenge the injustices baked into society.

One hundred and forty years later, though the workhouses are long gone and rights for children have been achieved, young people today are still calling for some of the same things. We call for a decent standard

of living, a world where our labour is compensated fairly, and for protection from runaway profiteering.

We cannot be complacent in thinking that younger generations will be attracted to Fabianism simply by virtue of having lived their formative years during brutal Conservative austerity. The reality of brain-drain looms around the corner as talented young workers seek opportunities elsewhere outside of Britain.

Fabianism must offer a vision of hope, where leisure and work can coexist in one’s life. Where our jobs are secure and our terms are not at the whims of exploitative bosses. Most importantly, a vision of a life where one does not spend their waking hours just trying to survive, but where there is the possibility to thrive. ■

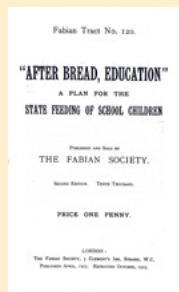
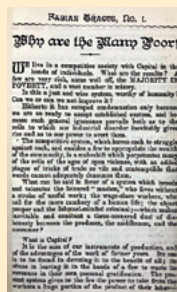
Eli Harris is a human rights activist with a background in climate diplomacy. She is the queer network coordinator of the Young European Socialists

Cover to cover

Pamphlets have been a key part of the Fabian Society's work since the very beginning. Here are some of the highlights

Why Are the Many Poor?

The one that started it all. Published in 1884 and coming in at just three pages long, it is rich with resonant lines such as this one: "Must workers continue in their misery while professors and politicians split straws and wrangle over trifles?" In 1984, the Fabians' centenary year, Professor Peter Townshend wrote a new pamphlet with the same title.

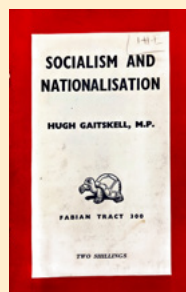
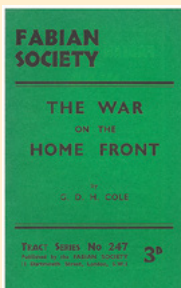


After Bread, Education: A Plan for the State Feeding of School Children

Just as we might still ask Why Are the Many Poor?, so too this 1905 publication tackles a problem that is still with us today. It proposed giving all children at least one free meal a day at school, a universalist approach that would, it said, "free the policy of feeding from the taint of pauperism". Almost 120 years later, mayor of London – and Fabian – Sadiq Khan introduced free meals for all London primary school children.

The War on the Home Front

The Fabian Society continued to publish during both world wars. In this work, published just after the second world war broke out, GDH Cole, who chaired the society from 1939 to 1946 and again from 1948 to 1950, argued that democracy must be safeguarded in the face of wartime restrictions, conscription and censorship. "While the war is going on, we have to do all we can to build foundations for a democratic Socialist system, and to fight against all tendencies that lead away from democratic Socialism," he wrote.



Socialism and Nationalisation

This pamphlet was published in 1956, the year after Hugh Gaitskell had become Labour leader and seven years before his death in office. He had, the publication tells us, "been a Fabian for many years". In the pamphlet, he outlined an expansion of public ownership "achieved by an alliance with fiscal policy" which could become a "major instrument of socialist policy".

The Common Market Debate

This pamphlet outlined the arguments for and against EEC membership made in a Fabian debate at the 1962 Labour conference by Roy Jenkins, then Labour MP for Birmingham Stechford and one of the leading advocates of joining the Common Market, and Douglas Jay, Labour MP for Battersea North. Another 'plus ça change' moment.

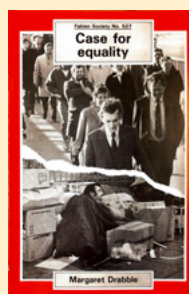


The New Politics: A Socialist Reconnaissance

Tony Benn joined the Fabian Society in 1943 and was a member for more than 70 years. This 1970 pamphlet was one of three he wrote for the society. In the 1990s, the Fabian Society used to sum up its pluralism with a simple phrase: "From Tony Blair to Tony Benn."

NHS Revisited

Barbara Castle was health secretary when this pamphlet was published in January 1976. She was one of many ministers to have written for the Fabian Society over the years. Here she argued for a “new, less bitter dialogue between the medical profession and government”.



The Case for Equality

Novelist Margaret Drabble covers her childhood and the work of both John Rawls and George Bernard Shaw in this 1988 pamphlet. “Only a society which can imagine the plight of its weakest members, and legislates for their inclusion into society rather than their virtual expulsion from it, can call itself a just or equal society. I remain a renegade, with Shaw, in my view that some form of equality of income is a crucial component of socialism and of a just society, and could it be introduced as a visionary millenarian experiment in the year 2000 I would raise my glass of as yet unharvested champagne and drink to its success,” the pamphlet reads.

Southern Discomfort

One of the most influential Fabian pamphlets of recent decades, Southern Discomfort, written by Labour MP Giles Radice in 1992, explored the attitudes which had contributed to Labour’s general election defeat under Neil Kinnock. It is widely seen as having prepared the ground for the shifts in the party that culminated in New Labour. It was followed by two more pamphlets for the Fabians, More Southern Discomfort and Any Southern Comfort, and then, after the 2010 election defeat, by a Policy Network study, Southern Discomfort Again?

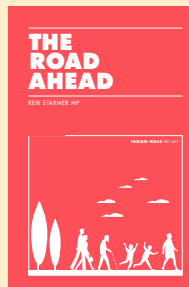


Euro-monetarism: Why Britain was ensnared

Also from 1992, this pamphlet by Ed Balls, then a young leader writer on the Financial Times, argued for the independence of the Bank of England. It was, he said later, a pretty controversial idea at the time – but when Gordon Brown became Chancellor in 1997 (with Balls by then one of his advisors) the policy was duly introduced.

Stronger Together: The 21st Century Case for Scotland and Britain

Gordon Brown was Chancellor of the Exchequer when he co-authored this pamphlet with Douglas Alexander in 2007 – seven years before the referendum which saw Scottish independence rejected. Brown’s Fabian output also includes a pamphlet on fairness and one published before the 2010 election entitled Why the Right is Wrong.

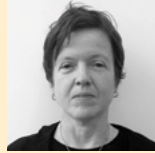


The Road Ahead

Keir Starmer became the latest Labour leader to publish a Fabian pamphlet when he wrote this in 2021. It set out his vision of a fairer, more secure Britain, based on 10 key principles which would form a new agreement between Labour and the British people.

Views from the top

Five Fabian general secretaries, past and present, discuss John Smith, splits, and the weight of history in conversation with *Kate Murray*



Kate Murray is editor of the Fabian Review

What do you call a collection of Fabian Society general secretaries? According to the general secretaries past and present that the Fabian Review brought together for a chat to mark the society's 140th anniversary, the correct collective noun should be 'a tract'.

So, with as many members of the 'tract' as we could gather, we discussed the highs and lows of the last few decades of Fabian history – and the contribution Fabianism continues to make to the Labour movement. In the room were Baroness Dianne Hayter, who led the society from 1976 to 1982 (and later became chair in 1992), Baroness Glenys Thornton, who served as interim general secretary from 1993 to 1994, Michael Jacobs (1997–2003), Sunder Katwala (2003–11) and current general secretary Andrew Harrop, who took over in 2011.

Which moments stand out?

Glenys Thornton: When John Smith died. The whole building was traumatised and in tears – some of us had been at the event the night before when he made that really wonderful speech about being given the opportunity to serve. We had a huge conference called 'Whatever Next?' already planned, which then suddenly became a rather important conference because we had a leadership election in the Labour party.

Dianne Hayter: A standout one for me, actually from when I was chair, is also a John Smith moment. The Fabians have a self-denying ordinance – we don't have a policy [position] and so it was always really drummed into me that we never voted at party conference on anything. And then there was the really important vote on one member one vote. Everyone had been chasing me around – it was that close. I was told the boss wanted to see me, so I went in to see John and he said – well, no matter what he said, because I don't think it's known. So I left and I voted. I think it was the right thing to do.

But [when I was general secretary], it was what we were doing internationally. I remember

[Felipe] Gonzales after the attempted takeover in the Spanish parliament coming in for a sandwich lunch with our executive. I remember meeting Kenneth Kaunda when he was over. I was very young when I went to the Fabians, so suddenly meeting all these extraordinary people was quite something for me. It was only when I went to the Fabians that I met people whose names were down the spines of books.

Sunder Katwala: I was 2003–2011 and the context was renewal – deepening in office but also transition. And of course it was a time of factionalism within New Labour. By the time of a leadership contest [in 2007], we ended up organising a leadership debate for a contest that only had one candidate in it. Gordon Brown actually debated Michael Meacher and John McDonnell and they didn't [make it onto] the ballot. I got a phone call from Ed Balls; he said: "Gordon's very clear he's very open to challenge" but someone in the machine was making sure there were no nominations. It was an extraordinary occasion.



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Andrew Harrop: The flipside of that [the New Labour year] is my time taking the Fabians through a very long period of opposition. The reason I've been happy doing the job for so long is that each parliament has been very different.

I think one of my most memorable moments was the [Fabian] hustings after the 2015 election, which was the first that Jeremy Corbyn attended, having just announced that he was going to stand. Corbyn turned up late and dressed in the way that he always was. It was a Fabian audience – and he set the room alight. He basically just tapped into that moment of complete disillusion after having lost. The rest of the debate was very conventional – people of the New Labour era debating with each other. He was able to stand out and bring people who were mainstream party members over to him.

Michael Jacobs: The standout in my period was the commission on taxation and citizenship. Its headline recommendation was a hypothecated tax for the National Health Service. The argument was that if you looked at public opinion, people were willing to pay more taxes but only if they felt it was going to the things that they really wanted it spent on. It seemed to us that reconnecting citizens to taxes would be helped by having a tax which was explicitly tied to the thing that they cared most about, which was health, and where the need for more money was most obvious. Gordon Brown didn't do a hypothecated health tax but, in his next budget, he did raise national insurance and earmarked it for the National Health Service. It was possibly the most popular budget that there has been in the history of measuring the popularity of budgets.

An existential crisis: the formation of the SDP

DH: We lost our vice-chair, who was Shirley Williams, our treasurer John Roper, John Cartwright and David Sainsbury. It was a big chunk of the executive. What they tried to say was that they were socialists, and that therefore they should remain as members

of the Fabian Society. Our rules were that you couldn't be an officer of the Fabian Society unless you were eligible to be in the Labour party – but it didn't say that about the membership. So they said they could stay as members and we had this awful thing then at the AGM in November 1981 to throw them out.

SK: But by my time we were doing an awful lot of 'Lib-Labbery' because there was basically a sense of a shared intellectual tradition.

DH: We were very tribal.

GT: We had to work very hard at local level to keep Labour party members in the Labour party and not to join the SDP. We were actually on the phones non-stop during those weeks to keep comrades in the Labour party – it was hand-to-hand combat.

Supporting and challenging the Labour party

MJ: The big deal in 1997 was: what was our stance going to be towards government? The Fabian committee at that time was what we would now call fairly Blairite. But Margaret [Hodge, then the chair of the society] was absolutely insistent we should not just be cheerleaders for the government, and that we should be a critical friend. I don't know whether this phrase 'critical friend' had prior history, but it became our watchword, and I wrote a piece in the *New Statesman* when I first came in which I talked about 'deep' Blairism and 'shallow' Blairism, trying to say that the Blair project could be a more conservative, narrowly conceived thing or it could be a deeper, wider project. For me, it was always about trying to expand the boundaries. It seemed to me that the government didn't need cheerleaders. It did its own cheerleading for what it wanted to do. It needed people who were willing to push the boundaries.

SK: [In my time] you had a different politics of identity that was emerging... we very much got hold of those

identity debates. Sadiq Khan got very involved in the Fabian Society, [as did] John Denham – I had those two trying to think about a bridging agenda around identity, integration and Britishness. Those things are absolutely front and centre now, but what’s interesting is just how little diversity there actually was in New Labour as a project in the higher echelons.

AH: Through those Corbyn years we felt we had a really important role in terms of holding the party together. We tried to be a place for safe and respectful debate. We did see it as important that we were hosting debate across the breadth of the party. We were sort of a lifeboat for some members – including some who had resigned from the party and others who were still in the party but just hunkered down.

Leading the Fabian Society: a historic responsibility?

SK: Some people join the Fabians because of the history. But it was important, I thought, not to make it a historical society, but to [cast] what the Fabians have been doing at [each] particular moment, whether it’s creating the Labour party, or clause four in 1918, as actually trying to be at the forward edge of their times. It’s a history of radicalism and change.

GT: From 1992 to 1997, the Fabians played a very important role in helping to develop what became the New Labour project. Partly it was the Southern Discomfort research [looking at the reasons for the 1992 defeat] and partly it was because it gave a platform to the people who ultimately became the New Labour founders and actors. After John Smith had led the one member one vote reform in the Labour party, his and others’ views were that the modernisation project had ended. I have to say that quite a few people disagreed with that. The Fabians were important not because we took a position on that, but because we provided the platforms necessary for the modernisation project to go forward. Then when John died that kind of precipitated us into helping to heal the Labour party, which was absolutely grieving.



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And the future?

AH: You do have a sense of history with the Fabians, but our membership also includes lots of young people, people from very, very diverse backgrounds. Some of them come to us because they’ve heard that history even at school, but a lot of them have never heard of the Fabians and come because of word of mouth – someone tells them about the FWN mentoring programme or Young Fabians. So there is still that role of developing people’s political life as well as our Westminster-facing role in providing ideas for the party leader.

MJ: In my experience, the Fabian membership is a pretty good microcosm of the party as a whole. I used to say that Tony Blair and Peter Mandelson not only invented new Labour – they invented Old Labour. They characterised everybody who wasn’t New Labour as Old Labour – and that was Roy Hattersley and Tony Benn. It was everybody who was a traditional Labour party person, right and left, and they were the new guys. I discovered that Fabian members were Old Labour. A lot of them were Hattersley-ites; they were very social democratic, but they were a bit suspicious of the shiny newness of New Labour. I suspect it’s still true that a lot of Fabian members are solid, middle of the road Labour people who are uncomfortable at the thought that a Starmer government just won’t be strong and radical enough to deal with the problems we have to deal with. The Fabian Society now, assuming Labour comes into government, can ask the leadership to be more radical than it currently looks, with the backing of its members and with the backing of the majority of Labour party members.

GT: A Labour government needs new ideas – and where are they going to come from if they’re not coming from us? **F**

Restoring trust

Politics can still make a difference, writes *Michael Shanks MP*



Michael Shanks is the Labour MP for Rutherglen and Hamilton West and shadow Scotland minister

We all know a week is a long time in politics, but the six months since I was elected have flashed by. In that time, we have welcomed four new colleagues in a series of byelections rounding off the 21 held in this parliament so far. The now traditional group photograph welcoming a new member to the parliamentary Labour party is becoming something of a monthly tradition. Perhaps we won't need a general election to form the next government after all.

Many of these byelections have been caused by misconduct, rule-breaking, illegality and failure to live up to the standards the public rightly expect of their MPs. It is little wonder trust in politicians and in politics itself is at an all-time low. Just nine per cent of the British public say they trust politicians to tell the truth, making us the most mistrusted profession.

That should worry us all – no matter our politics. However debased our political culture has become in recent years, parliament remains the best way for the voices of the marginalised to be heard and the battle towards social justice to be fought. A discredited political class does none of us any good.

In my maiden speech in the Commons, I spoke about the lack of nuance in our political discourse. Complexity has somehow become a negative, something to be hushed up in favour of simplified, focus-grouped slogans. Take Back Control. Long-Term Economic Plan. Strong and Stable. Like the government that coined these phrases, they crumble under the slightest analysis.

What I detected during my byelection campaign was a sense not of voter apathy – which would suggest voters have given up caring altogether – but rather voter frustration. To use a good Scottish word, they are scunnered at being let down time and time again by distracted and divided governments right when they need government on their side most.

Donald Dewar is a political hero of mine. I met him when I was 11 years old, when the Scottish Parliament

opened its doors for the first time on the Mound in Edinburgh. His speech that day still makes me sit up and think afresh on the incredible opportunity we who are elected have. He spoke of the mace with its four interwoven values – wisdom, justice, compassion, integrity. Most powerfully of all, he spoke of the fallibility of politicians. We will make mistakes, he said, but we will never lose sight of what brought us into politics – to strive to do well by the people and to contribute to the common weal.

That is our mission: a collective mission above party and above narrow self-interest. Above everything else, a mission to restore faith in politics as a means to achieving improved lives for all. To recommit ourselves to the march towards social justice which is at best faltering and, for a growing number of people, in reverse.

Before I was elected, I had the privilege of teaching young people. Given the state of the world we are asking them to inherit, the very least we can offer is a world-class education. However, we now have a generation of young people who have only ever known an SNP government in Holyrood. After 17 years, education standards in a country once heralded as having the best schools system in the world are in decline. The attainment gap – the measure Nicola Sturgeon staked her entire political reputation on closing – remains stubbornly wide. Your postcode and your family's wealth continue to decide far too much of your life chances.

The young people I taught are full of potential. The young people I worked with in youth justice – trapped in a cycle of poverty, chaotic homelife and criminality – are full of potential too. But they are being held back by two governments that are in disarray – distracted and debilitated by division instead of focusing on the challenges of the future.

This is where politicians need to stand up and be counted. We must display those values Donald Dewar spoke about 25 years ago: we must be compassionate, act with integrity, fight for justice and not be afraid of complexity. Wrestle with the difficult stuff. Argue about it – passionately, but genuinely. Disagree without being disagreeable. Work to find the commonsense solutions that actually change people's lives. We cannot think 'systems' are unchangeable, or write people off as hard to reach – rather, we must change our services to be more in reach of those who need them.

It has become fashionable for people – perhaps even a majority of people – to denigrate politics. During my short time in Westminster, it has become clearer than ever to me why people view our deliberations as being removed from their daily lives. But I have also seen some of the best our democracy has to offer – MPs from all sides fighting for the victims of the Post Office scandal, the infected blood scandal and for any number of causes that may only affect a small number of people, but affect them greatly.

As I used to tell my pupils when I was encouraging them to turn out and vote (regardless of who they voted for) – politics changes our lives for good or ill, and it is our responsibility to engage with it meaningfully and use it to push for meaningful change. We owe it to everyone on these islands to raise our game and show that politics can deliver the change people so desperately need. ■

Outside No 10

Labour's long periods in opposition have been frustrating – but they have often given the party the chance to reinvent itself. *Richard Johnson* takes a look



Dr Richard Johnson is senior lecturer in politics at Queen Mary, University of London. Keeping the Red Flag Flying: The Labour Party in Opposition Since 1922, is published by Polity

The historian Richard Toye recently argued, half in jest, that Labour has been an extremely successful party, if judged by the standard of preventing any other party from supplanting it as the official opposition. In the 102 years since Ramsay MacDonald's Labour placed second in a general election for the first time, the party has held this status for 69 of them.

In general, Labour has been very adept at guarding its place as the largest non-governing party in parliament. There have only been a couple of close calls. When the Liberal party withdrew from the National Government in 1933, Labour edged them by just 16 seats. In 1983, Labour won 27 per cent of the vote compared to the SDP-Liberal Alliance's 25 per cent, but first past the post rescued Labour from electoral oblivion.

More recently, some disgruntled Labour MPs toyed with the (fanciful) possibility of forming a breakaway grouping large enough to supplant the Corbyn-led Labour party as the official opposition. Had the 197 MPs who expressed no confidence in Jeremy Corbyn's leadership in 2016 organised themselves as a successful grouping, the rump Labour party would have been smaller than the SNP. In the end, the vehicle of sedition, Change UK, could not even muster a dozen MPs to fill its ranks.

These exceptions aside, the only upsets to Labour's well-cemented place as the official opposition have been its intermittent forays into government: nine months in 1924 (when Labour held just a third of the seats in parliament), two years during the Great Depression, six years following the second world war, a total of 11 years in the 1960s and 70s thanks to Harold Wilson's four election victories, and the 13 years of New Labour.

Many books have been written about these Labour governments, but none has previously looked specifically at Labour's time in opposition. My new book with the

political historians Mark Garnett and Gavin Hyman is the first to do so. Opposition is Labour's modal position, and we believe that is vital to understand how Labour operates as an opposition party specifically.

Often, opposition is regarded as wasted time. For a party like Labour that aspires to be in government to change society for the better, opposition can be a period of frustration and despair. The opposition years come to be seen as merely some kind of unfortunate waiting room between periods in government.

While not discounting the potential for opposition to be years of misery, anguish, and even self-destruction, we believe that time spent in opposition is also extremely important. During a period of opposition, the party is forced to take stock of its ideas, refine its policy programme, train its MPs, and address its internal organisation. Labour has undergone enormous transformation in such periods, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Anyone who doubts that opposition is formative need only compare the Labour party rejected by voters in May 1979 with the almost unrecognisable one that faced the electorate 18 years later.

In our book, we identify six common challenges that Labour oppositions face. Three of these are inward-facing: assessing the record of the previous Labour government; reforming the party's internal machinery; and developing a policy agenda. Two are outward-facing: holding the government to account and winning public support. The last, a hybrid of internal and external dynamics, is Labour's unique challenge of managing its relationship with the trade union movement.

Each chapter of the book is organised around a discrete period of time in which Labour was in opposition. We assess how well Labour achieved these tasks in each of them. Throughout, we find a party constantly struggling

between the competing demands of addressing its internal problems, appearing attractive to the public, and trying to limit the worst excesses of Conservative governments.

In July 1983, Neil Kinnock was asked why he thought Labour had lost the previous month's election. His answer captured the dilemma he faced as leader for following decade: "The British public formed the opinion that we were more concerned with our internal affairs than with their affairs."

Labour cannot and must not shirk this internal work, as Kinnock himself would discover. It is vitally important. The 1920s and 1930s were critical decades in which Labour applied the 'blueprint' of its 1918 constitution to the realities of mass electoral politics. In the 13 years of opposition from 1951 to 1964, Labour undertook vital modernisation of its electoral machinery. In the 1980s and 1990s, Labour's policy programme transformed dramatically. In the 2020s, Labour has placed relentless pressure on successive governments and ensured that no recent Conservative prime minister (and there have been many) has successfully dominated the political landscape.

Opposition years have been difficult and sometimes traumatic for the party, but they are not wasted or unnecessary time. Labour governments are ultimately better for the work that is done – and can only be done – in opposition. Out of government, parties can be more experimental. They can trial ideas, and see how they float. In government, the costs of bad policy can be enormous – public finances left in tatters; lives destroyed or even lost. In opposition, the costs of bad policy are usually relegated to those of a political kind – bad headlines or disgruntled party members. This should encourage Labour to be bold in opposition – to oppose in poetry, even if its has to govern in prose. A former member of the NEC once told me: "When you're in opposition it's a different dynamic. You don't have to cross every t, dot every i."



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The problem, of course, is that Labour oppositions want to be 'taken seriously'. So, many try to behave as if they were in government already, imposing artificial strictures to discipline themselves and their shadow government. Indeed, Hugh Gaitskell used to refer to the Labour party as 'the alternative government of the country'. Labour leaders have gone to great pains to win the coveted label of looking 'prime ministerial'. One former Labour MP said to me that the challenge is not to find oneself "sitting below the salt".

Foreign leaders have sometimes been appealed to to provide assistance on this front. In 1963, Harold Wilson was eager to go to Washington to meet with President John F Kennedy. Kennedy not only met with Wilson but had a one-on-one meeting in the Oval Office with George Brown, Labour's deputy leader. Angela Rayner is still waiting for her invitation from Joe Biden.

But this single-minded need to be taken seriously is not risk free. It is easier to be snubbed or dismissed as opposition leader than as prime minister. In 1987, Neil Kinnock and shadow Foreign Secretary Denis Healey went to see Ronald Reagan in the Oval Office. It was a disaster. Kinnock clashed with the president over nuclear weapons and Reagan greeted Healey: "Nice to see you again, Mr Ambassador.". The forgetful president had form on this front, once referring to a member of his own Cabinet as 'Mr Mayor'.

On the home front, 'economic credibility' is a perennial challenge for Labour oppositions. In the 1960s, Harold Wilson was asked by the Labour MP Tam Dalyell how difficult he found being prime minister. He replied, 'Not half as difficult as being leader of the opposition'. Wilson then added: "and that wasn't half as difficult as being shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, the most difficult job of all in British politics."

Perhaps these are words of comfort for Labour's shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves as she has to navigate the (perceived) Scylla and Charybdis of having an economic programme that is sufficiently radical to be worthy of the historic mission of the Labour party while also placating the scowls of the right-wing press, financial markets, and (most importantly) sceptical voters.

In this vein, the same story has repeated itself every decade for the last century. When Labour loses an election, the party grassroots condemn the previous government as a terrible disappointment, insufficiently radical. Enormous pressure is placed on the party leadership in opposition to develop a bolder agenda. The party leadership, while trying to be truthful to socialist principles (with varying degrees of personal sympathy), is also mindful of the need to seem 'credible'. They, therefore, will often try to suppress the radical impulses of the party, sometimes with a wink-and-a-nod that once in government the party will be able to pursue a more transformative agenda.

Before becoming leader himself, Neil Kinnock wrote that it was daft to "think that we can get socialism by stealth as a nice, safe opposition leader tears off his pin-striped moderation to become a socialist superman in office". Yet, this is Labour's perennial confidence trick. The question is, who this time is being tricked: the public or party members? The verdict will be rendered in the books written about the next Labour government. **F**

Home turf

The link between MPs and their constituents is an important feature of our democracy. But social media, press coverage and harassment are all making constituency representation harder than ever before, as *Louise Thompson* explains



Louise Thompson is a senior lecturer in politics at the University of Manchester

When I teach my students about British politics, I always tell them that one thing which makes our system stand out is that even the prime minister has to have conversations with constituents about whether their bins have been emptied or when the council will get around to filling in that pothole at the end of their road. All MPs are equal in this respect, regardless of party affiliation, length of service or seniority. This link between MPs and their constituencies is also deeply ingrained within parliament itself. We hear it daily in the way MPs address one another in the House of Commons chamber, in questions to the government and in the content of MPs' backbench speeches.

For many MPs, constituency work is deeply satisfying. In her book *The Life of an MP*, Jess Phillips writes quite movingly about how much she values contact with her constituents. This contact has increased dramatically in the 21st century, aided by channels like email and social media, as well as organised lobbying through organisations like 38 Degrees.

No surprise, then, that the constituency work we see reflected in formal parliamentary life has also increased. The phrase 'my constituency' has been uttered by MPs in the Commons chamber on over 16,000 occasions since the 2019 general election, far more than we would have heard it even 10 or 20 years ago. The introduction of Westminster Hall, the parallel debating chamber, in 1999, and the creation of the backbench business committee in 2010 have helped MPs to find outlets for pressing constituency issues to be aired, with debates this year on everything from nursery provision in the South West to heather burning in Sheffield Hallam.

There are obvious benefits to be gained from this dedication to local issues. Research has shown that MPs who focus their attentions on their constituencies are rewarded, not only with re-election but with greater trust from the public. But the dedication to constituency work even by MPs who are standing down or who have stepped back from frontline politics (like former prime ministers) suggests that for most it is something of a vocation.

There are, however, four increasing challenges around constituency work. First, it remains a fairly opaque activity. Although some MPs do publicise the number of casework issues they deal with, we do not really know how much time is spent on constituency issues. Constituencies may be roughly the same size in terms of their electorate,



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but they vary in geographical size and in the sorts of issues which are important. An MP elected in inner-city London will have an email inbox which is very different in scope from that of an MP elected to represent the Outer Hebrides. The burden of constituency work may therefore vary quite heavily between constituencies.

Second, determining what constituents' wishes actually are is not an easy task for MPs. The content of an MP's postbag or email inbox may seem to be the obvious measurement here, but those who speak the loudest are often those who are protesting about something. We are all much more likely to put our fingers to the keyboard and email an MP about something that we object to and much less likely to do so for something we support. This means that whilst it can be obvious which political issues are raising the most concern, it is impossible to be certain about what the majority of constituents' wishes really are. The Brexit referendum was an exception to this, in that it provided MPs with a real time snapshot of public opinion in their constituencies. The average turnout across the UK was 72 per cent, but in many areas it was much higher. Chiltern, for instance, saw 83 per cent of its electorate come out to vote. This may explain why some Labour MPs were prepared to defy the whip when Johnson's EU Withdrawal Agreement Bill came before them.

Third, constituency work has become a much more dangerous. The murders of Jo Cox and David Amess on the streets of their constituencies, reports of death threats received by MPs because of their stance on political issues and the increasing amounts of money spent on parliamentary security, which according to IPSA has risen by £3m between 2010 and 2022, demonstrate how the everyday work of MPs and their staff has become an increasingly perilous activity. Even votes on minor, non-binding issues can bring serious consequences. Several MPs, including Mike Freer, have announced their resignations on the grounds of personal safety and intimidation.

Fourth, there continues to be a real lack of understanding among the public about what MPs actually do and what their votes mean. This is unhelpfully fuelled by media reporting of parliamentary recesses as 'holidays' and critical social media posts of an empty Commons chamber, implying that MPs should be present on the green benches at all times. It is also not helped by the reporting of divisions which often proceed as though all votes have the same weight and which fail to understand the complex mix of party politics, individual judgement and constituency concerns which sit behind an MP's decision around if and how to vote.

Together, this puts MPs in an incredibly tough position, something which was demonstrated well by the recent debates and votes on a ceasefire in Gaza. Unsurprisingly, this is an issue which has seen huge numbers of constituents contact their MP. One MP told the Commons that

they had never received as many emails on a political issue before, describing how 500 emails came in to their office overnight before the King's Speech debate on foreign policy in November. The wave of resignations from Labour frontbenchers at that time after voting on an SNP amendment calling for an immediate ceasefire demonstrated how responsive MPs are to their constituents and how this commitment does, at times, trump directions from political parties. Jess Phillips' resignation letter told how she was voting with "my constituents, my head and my heart" while Naz Shah explained that in voting for the ceasefire she was "representing the people of Bradford West". Those who chose to abstain from the SNP's motion, in line with standard party practice, faced public disapproval – and worse. Labour MP Tan Dhesi told how he received death threats, despite his public support elsewhere for a ceasefire. The fact that political parties would not normally support opposition day motions or amendments from other political parties, or that opposition day motions themselves are non-binding, is difficult to translate to those watching events from the outside.

The opposition day debate on Gaza chosen by the SNP in February this year generated a truly staggering number of constituency responses. The SNP's Dave Doogan, for example, told the House that the motion accounted for 23 per cent of his casework,

while Labour's Sam Tarry estimated that he had received "literally tens of thousands" of letters, emails and phone calls on the issue. Whether or not you agree with Commons speaker Lindsay Hoyle's actions in selecting a Labour amendment to the SNP's motion, his statement to the House after the fact suggested that his decision had been based on the need to ensure the safety and security of all MPs. Allowing for a debate on each of the main parties' amendments was a way of doing this. Although the evening descended into chaos, it may have been some comfort to MPs that no formal division was held and therefore that there were no published lists of who voted for or against or abstained on the motion.

As we look towards a new parliament, these constituency tensions are not going to disappear. More than 90 MPs are standing down and many more seats are likely to change hands. Recent events may leave this new cohort uneasy about how to reconcile increasingly vocal constituency preferences with those of their party. It may be time to reflect on how these issues can be addressed. One way might be to allow MPs to add an explanatory statement to their vote, particularly where they choose to abstain. Another option could be to increase the use of more indicative-style votes in the House, providing MPs with more voting options and avoiding simple yes and no binaries on complex non-legislative issues. Addressing some of these issues will help maintain the link between individual MPs and their constituencies which we cherish. ■

Constituency work has become much more dangerous. Even votes on minor issues can bring serious consequences

Superpower status

Science and technology must be at the heart of Labour's growth plans, argues *Will Lord*



Will Lord works in the aerospace industry and was previously a civil servant working on science and regional policy. He is a policy fellow at the Centre for Science & Policy at the University of Cambridge

With Labour positioning itself as the party of economic growth, it must remember that any serious growth strategy demands ambitious policies for science and technology. Until recently, Labour struggled to show how it would meet the Conservatives' unfulfilled promise to make the UK a "science superpower". But at October's party conference, the new shadow Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Peter Kyle laid the foundations for a new approach. As well as streamlining funding processes and increasing the number of 'spinout' companies from universities, he promised to give researchers greater certainty through setting 10-year R&D budgets for funders.

This is a very encouraging start, with loud echoes of New Labour's 10-year framework for science and innovation, published in 2004. Labour should be wary of embracing that government's vision wholesale, however: science policy under Blair and Brown has valuable lessons for Starmer's Labour both to emulate and avoid.

From the time Lloyd George levied a penny per working person per year to support medical research, 20th century British governments took an increasingly hands-on role supporting science and technology. This reached its apex in the technocratic, interventionist postwar state, which invested huge sums in large industrial projects, anchored by what historian David Edgerton identifies as a distinctly national capitalism. This system did not rely solely on universities, but government laboratories and corporate laboratories too.

Harold Wilson hoped to build on this through transforming the economy with the 'White Heat' of technology, establishing a Ministry of Technology led by an energetic Tony Benn, but achieved mixed results. Then, the Thatcher era was a decisive break, with large public funding cuts and a shift away from supporting applied research. In 1985, the governing assembly of the chemistry graduate Thatcher's alma mater, Oxford, refused to give her an honorary degree. In 1986, the Campaign to Save British Science was launched by academics in protest at the government. When New Labour inherited a tattered public realm in 1997, Britain's science base was no exception.

Science and technology were not as central to Blair's worldview in 1997 as they are to Starmer's today. But New Labour did take a meaningful interest in science as a way of supporting British enterprise in a globalising world. The year 2000 saw Gordon Brown introduce R&D tax credits as well as Tony Blair's joint appearance with President Bill Clinton to celebrate the completion of the first survey of the Human Genome Project. But the 10-year framework, launched in the 2004 spending review and led in the Treasury by John Kingman, later chair of UK Research and Innovation, is the best summary of New Labour's science policy.

The framework was a quintessentially New Labour document in its emphasis on targets, increased investment, and human capital. It contained detailed metrics covering everything from PhDs per head of population to shares of world-class research citations and business investment, as well as now aching familiar calls to increase R&D's share of GDP to 2.5 per cent and for universities to take a lower share of intellectual property in spinout companies. A focus on human capital can be seen in a drive for more pupils to take science and maths, with generous bonuses for their teachers. It was far from just talk: annual 5.8 per cent increases in public spending reversed the worst of the 1980s cuts and helped science to flourish. In 2005, the Campaign to Save British Science changed to the Campaign for Science and Engineering: British science had been saved.

Two things were particularly worth emulating. First was a genuine commitment to improving working conditions for researchers by increasing PhD stipends with inflation and reducing universities' reliance on insecure, short-term contracts. With universities wracked by strikes and the government estimating 150,000 additional people are needed for the R&D workforce by 2030, Labour should once again take on the mission of driving up pay and working conditions in the sector.

Secondly, the framework took public engagement seriously. Innovation does not happen in a vacuum, and without the consent and support of the public, may even provoke backlash. The 2004 framework understood this, including meaningful targets and new grants to build



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“a society that is confident about the governance, regulation and use of science and technology”. At the time the focus was on nanotechnology and animal research, but is no less valuable in today’s era of breakneck developments in artificial intelligence. The next Labour government’s science policy should be underpinned by an ambitious public engagement strategy.

At the same time, there are things the next Labour government should do differently. First, its science policy must be tied to an industrial strategy. The 2004 framework has a remarkable faith that ideas from people in lab coats would eventually translate to economic growth. It did not think seriously enough about how to nurture innovation-rich industries in the UK or encourage the wider business base to adopt new technology. It was only with the 2008 financial crash and New Industry, New Jobs under Peter Mandelson that New Labour took a more active approach to supporting specific sectors and shaping the market. A Starmer-led government has the opportunity to do this from the very start, earmarking large shares of public R&D funding for the delivery of the four missions in Labour’s Industrial Strategy. Labour’s industrial strategy should launch a green industrial challenge fund for long-term R&D programmes in battery technologies, hydrogen, electrification technologies and others essential to the net zero transition.

Second, it should have a strategy for ‘place’. Innovation thrives in locations where knowledge-rich people, institutions and businesses all interact. Currently, the UK has two problems with its economic geography. First, it is heavily dependent on the ‘golden triangle’ of London, Oxford and Cambridge, which is rapidly running out of housing and laboratory space. Meanwhile, cities like Manchester, Glasgow and Leeds have real science and technology strengths but underperform where they could be.

The 2004 framework paid some attention to this, but other than acknowledging work by now-scraped

Regional Development Agencies, it fell short. Indeed one of Blair’s more controversial science policy decisions was to locate a cutting-edge synchrotron facility in Oxford rather than Daresbury after ferocious lobbying from the Wellcome Trust and his chief scientific advisor. The next Labour government should take a policy stance that works for the whole country: providing generous, devolved R&D settlements for clusters outside the golden triangle and ensuring any 10-year budgets come with targets to increase investment in less prosperous regions, while launching development corporations to unlock housing and laboratory space in Oxford and Cambridge.

Finally, Labour must nurture new ways of doing science. The 2004 framework was incurious about how science and innovation are conducted. It was focused on tweaking the system rather than radically changing it. But today’s crisis in ‘research productivity’ – with an ever-larger number of people needed to achieve new discoveries – means the traditionally hierarchical and often conformist culture of research cannot be relied on. Recent years have seen the launch of higher-risk, more experimental institutions like the Advanced Research and Invention Agency (ARIA) and the AI Taskforce. An incoming Labour government should extend their approach to other areas, introducing similar taskforces for green technologies and a new generation of fellowships for the most promising young researchers. It could even propose a new international research project on the scale of the Human Genome Project.

Science and technology policy under Starmer should reflect Labour’s overall approach to the past: learning from the best of the New Labour project while recognising we are in a very different world and governing accordingly. Brown and Blair revived British science after years of neglect. Kyle, Reeves and Starmer have the opportunity to go further, mending UK innovation at its foundations and putting it at the heart of a renewed economy. **F**

Blueprint for change

Mark Drakeford has a claim to being the most impactful Labour politician of the past decade. *Jane Hutt MS* reflects on his legacy – and explores the lessons a Starmer government could learn



Jane Hutt MS is the Welsh Minister for Social Justice and chief whip in the Welsh Assembly

At the end of last year, five years to the day after he assumed office, Mark Drakeford announced his intention to step down as First Minister of Wales.

His parting message? “I hope people see we were radical.”

I have had the good fortune to serve in his cabinet since the beginning of his tenure in 2018, doing my part to realise Mark and his team’s vision of what 21st century socialism could deliver. This vision was clear even before Mark took office. In the foreword to his leadership manifesto, Mark said he was putting himself forward: “...to serve my country and my party because I passionately believe our most radical days are ahead of us. I want to lead a government that pushes the boundaries of the Assembly’s powers to help people fulfil their potential... These ideas reflect the radical tradition of Welsh socialism and apply these principles to 21st Century Wales.”

It is a testament to his political will and courage that the proposals set out in Mark’s manifesto were followed by a comprehensive policy and legislative programme set in motion when he became First Minister in December 2018 and distilled in the Welsh Labour manifesto of 2021 and subsequent programme for government.

There is no question that Mark was thrust into the limelight during the pandemic, and has been credited as being “by far the most high-profile Welsh First Minister” since powers were first transferred from Westminster to Cardiff in the late 1990s. People got to know and trust Mark through his regular press conferences, always accompanied by a BSL Signer, which

brought people together to hear the latest news about the Welsh Government’s response to the virus. By April 2020, he was publishing plans to lead Wales out of the pandemic, establishing the impact on equality as a key principle as we saw the disproportionate impact of Covid on people and communities already affected by Brexit and the years of austerity imposed by the UK government.

But after announcing his departure, Mark emphasised his administration’s successes elsewhere. “I hope people will see this as period when we did some of those challenging and radical things”, he said, highlighting policies such as scrapping the M4 relief road in recognition

of the urgent need to safeguard the changing climate and further embedding the world’s first Well-being of Future Generations Act in the work we do in Wales. With Labour on the verge of power in Westminster, it is worth taking stock and reflecting on Mark’s achievements, and the lessons for UK Labour.

Social justice has been at the forefront of the Welsh Government’s agenda. Following the killing of George Floyd and our recognition of

Black Lives Matter, Mark commissioned Gaynor Legall, the first Black city councillor in Wales, to undertake a review of monuments and street names associated with the slave trade, which resulted in new guidelines for public commemoration. Professor Charlotte Williams was appointed to lead work to make Black history and heritage a mandatory part of the new curriculum now being rolled out in schools across Wales.

We have ensured the perspectives of people with lived experience are at the heart of our Anti-Racist Wales

Mark Drakeford’s parting message? “I hope people see we were radical.”



© Senedd Cymru Welsh Parliament/Wikimedia Commons

action plan being implemented across government and all sectors of society and have established the Disability Rights Taskforce following a stark report on the impact of Covid on disabled people.

Under Mark's leadership, we have seen the enactment of the socioeconomic duty in March 2021, and publication of the LGBTQ+ action plan, which is acknowledged as an example of human rights policymaking by the UN.

A number of other progressive policy initiatives in Wales are in progress – the basic income pilot for care leavers, the Warm Homes programme, continuation of the Fuel Foundation Partnership, eliminating private profit from social care in our children's homes and the launch of Cwtch Mawr in Swansea to help tackle child poverty by reusing the excess goods from the private sector to support some of the most hard-pressed families and communities.

Mark's universal approach has been key to many of the radical policies introduced by Welsh Labour since devolution – and even before Mark became First Minister. It is no surprise we introduced free prescriptions, free school breakfasts in primary schools, and the most generous concessionary fares and student support in the UK during Mark's time working as a (very) special adviser.

Key to Mark's effectiveness is his ability to get on with people across the political spectrum where there is a common thread of humanity and political purpose. He is held in high esteem by not only his ministerial and parliamentary colleagues but also his opponents across the chamber. A strong proponent of proportional representation, he has been a pivotal force over the past 24 years of devolution, supporting the various and differing arrangements we have secured in cooperation with other political parties to achieve a range of progressive political outcomes.

I have been at his side in developing and nurturing these collaborations which have brought us to today's cooperation agreement with Plaid Cymru, which has achieved many important outcomes, including the rollout of universal free school meals for primary school children, tackling the complex issues regarding second

home ownership, an expansion of Flying Start childcare, a consultation on a fairer council tax and the first steps towards a national care service and modernising the school day and school year.

But the great and lasting prize will be the creation of a 'modern Senedd'. Last September, the Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Bill was introduced to expand the Senedd from 60 to 96 members to "better represent people in Wales, with increased capacity to scrutinize, make laws and hold the Government to account."

Wales mourned with and for Mark when his wife Clare died suddenly last January. There was a communal feeling – a feeling that, in the Welsh way of togetherness, he was one of our family. He expressed his sorrow openly and, in return, received Wales' comfort and support.

This degree of affection and loyalty for Mark was apparent again on 13 December, when he made his resignation announcement. There was a feeling of genuine gratitude which spread from the political world to the community and corner shop.

After Mark's resignation, director of the Wales Governance Centre and dean of public affairs at Cardiff University, Richard Wyn Jones, remarked: "As England suffered the chaos of Boris Johnson, Wales had Mark Drakeford. Here's how we'll miss him. Drakeford's seriousness of purpose, humanity and – yes – vulnerability, will be sorely missed."

Having stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Mark for more than 30 years, I never had any doubt he would be an exceptional leader for Wales, and I encouraged him to put his name forward from the day his predecessor, Carwyn Jones, announced he would be standing down, and was proud to help lead his campaign.

I am sure that Mark will help us to continue to move forward, with hope and ambition for the future of Wales. ■



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No silver bullet

The House of Lords has many problems – but peers play a crucial and overlooked role in our democracy, writes *Francesca Sellors*



Francesca Sellors is a civil servant who previously worked for a shadow minister. She holds an MA in political theory

Last year, Keir Starmer announced that, if in government, the Labour party would replace the House of Lords with a democratically elected second chamber. The policy was inspired by Gordon Brown's Commission on the UK's Future and reflects increasing criticism of hereditary peerages, the automatic inclusion of 26 Church of England bishops, and the Lords' bloated size (it is the second largest legislative chamber in the world). Since its announcement, the policy has been

watered down: Labour is no longer committed to carrying it out during a first term. Nonetheless, abolition of the upper house remains a long-term aim of the party.

The above criticisms of the House of Lords are valid, and Labour's planned attempt to increase devolution through a new second chamber centred around local representatives correctly identifies Britain's Westminster-centrism problem. As Starmer summarised: "The centre hasn't delivered." However, replacing the Lords with an elected chamber is a more radical solution than many recognise. An unelected second chamber offers many benefits, most of which are overlooked because they intuitively seem at odds with democracy. This intuition is misguided. Ensuring our upper house provides maximum benefit to our democratic and legislative processes requires reforming it, not overhauling it.

To recognise the value of an appointed House of Lords, it is necessary to understand that democracy is about more than just elections. Voting is, of course, essential to any democracy, where the citizenry must ultimately decide who holds power. The UK currently adheres to this principle: while peers can delay a bill, conclusive power lies with elected MPs. But democracy does not stop at voting. General elections usually take place only every five years; between each one, half a decade passes where, bar referenda and byelections, the public has no direct control over those in power. Instead, the public relies on processes of scrutiny and institutional checks and balances to ensure the government continues to act appropriately. Peers play an important role in these mechanisms of oversight, one that is bolstered by their appointment, rather than their election, in two key ways.



First, peers are far less beholden to party lines than MPs. They are not susceptible to being persuaded into unfaltering party loyalty through the temptation of a ministerial position or the threat of a ministerial sacking – unless they are David Cameron – and they do not rely on a party machine to help them win votes at elections, hence why so many are not party affiliated. As a result, peers show far more willingness to challenge all parties, including their own. In the past decade, we have seen the benefit of this on two crucial occasions. In 2015, peers voted twice to delay George Osborne’s unpopular plan to cut tax credits, leading the then-Chancellor to execute a U-turn. Then, last February, peers removed controversial plans to curb the right to protest in Priti Patel’s Public Order Bill, preventing the draconian proposals from becoming law. On both these occasions, the Lords had a Conservative majority. Yet peers chose to vote against the government and, in doing so, prevented two of the Tories’ most damaging policies.

It seems unlikely that the Lords would remain such an effective check on power if elected. They would become far more dependent on party support to help them canvass votes, which would decrease the number of non-affiliated peers and dissuade others from voting against their party. Depending on when its elections take place, the second chamber would likely be dominated by either the governing or opposition party. In the case of the former, it would vote against the government less; in the latter, it would likely reject legislation too often for this to be seen as significant. It would also slow down the legislative process, as currently happens in America, where the Republican-majority Senate opposes the decisions of the Democratic-majority House of Representatives as a matter of course. As it currently stands, the House of Lords defies the government carefully, showing deference to the elected chamber and ensuring any opposition is effective.

Second, peers can devote far more time and expertise to the legislative process by virtue of being appointed rather than elected. MPs are required to be public-facing: they must constantly update their constituents to show they are working hard in their interests. This isn’t a bad thing – MPs should be communicative and open with those they represent. But their public-facing work reduces the time and effort they can devote to legislation. It also changes the skillset associated with becoming an MP, with many entering the Commons with public relations and politics-adjacent experience, rather than with an industry-specific background.

Peers do not have this competing demand on their time, and consequently are able to devote more energy to legislating. More significantly, peers don’t need public relations skills to be successful in their role. As a result, the upper house is more open to those from a greater variety of backgrounds, such as religious leaders, industry experts, and community workers. Take Baroness Doreen Lawrence, for example, who has

An elected upper chamber would lose much of the subject-specific expertise currently held in the Lords

decades of experience fighting for racial equality and police reform. Or Baroness Genista McIntosh, who has an extensive background working in British theatre and culture. Many peers who bring varied and highly valuable knowledge to parliament would not necessarily have the experience or desire to compete in an election. An elected upper chamber would lose much of the subject-specific expertise currently held in the House of Lords in favour of members with narrower, political backgrounds, as is increasingly the case in the House of Commons. British legislation would suffer as a result.

I saw these benefits of the upper house – peers’ willingness to break party lines and their subject knowledge – when I worked as a researcher for a shadow minister, who led on Labour’s response to a piece of legislation. We tabled multiple amendments to the bill during its committee stage in the Commons, none of which were particularly ideological, but each of which was necessary to ensure the legislation was robust. Despite some Tory MPs on the committee privately agreeing with our proposals, every Conservative member voted against every one of our amendments, no matter what argument we put forward. It wasn’t that they strongly opposed our suggestions; indeed, I wondered whether some MPs had even read the bill, given that most spoke only to vote. Rather, it seemed that they unthinkingly went with their party whip.

When the bill entered the House of Lords, it was a different story. My advising role became far less significant, as the Labour peers overseeing the bill were already highly knowledgeable on its proposals and their effects. Our amendments were far more successful, not because they had changed (they were pretty much identical), but because non-Labour peers listened to and considered our arguments and were willing to vote against the government. Consequently, multiple amendments – albeit in compromised form – made their way back to the Commons and were voted into law. Thanks to the Lords, then, the bill became a more robust piece of legislation.

This is just one example of the legislative process, but it highlights well how the House of Lords can work in the public’s favour precisely because – unlike the Commons – it is not elected. That isn’t to say that criticisms of the Lords are not valid. Its size is extortionate and its processes of selection are not always fair or representative. Having an upper chamber that allows for more regional representation also has the potential to hugely improve British politics.

But these changes can – and should – come from reforming rather than overhauling our upper house. Though power should always ultimately lie with an elected chamber, democracy involves more than just voting. Our appointed peers provide a level of legislative scrutiny that the Commons rarely matches not in spite of but because they are not elected. To overlook this risks unintentionally damaging our democratic process. Labour should reform the House of Lords; it should not abolish it. ■

Books

Redressing the balance

Calls to tackle wealth inequality are growing ever louder, argues *Stewart Lansley*



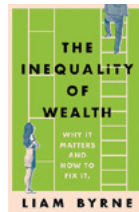
Stewart Lansley is the author of The Richer, The Poorer, How Britain Enriched the Few and Failed the Poor, a 200-year history, published by Bristol University Press

Liam Byrne's book on wealth inequality is to be welcomed. Despite Britain's fragile economy, personal wealth holdings have surged in recent decades. National wealth – a mix of property, business, financial and state assets – stands at almost seven times the size of the economy, up from three times in the 1970s. This personal asset explosion has been a windfall for the already rich, reversing the earlier long term shift to greater equality. As Byrne puts it: "Since 2010, the richest 1 per cent have multiplied their wealth 31 times faster than the rest of us." This asset capture has little to do with a leap forward in wealth creation that would have served the common good. Much of it is unearned, a product of privatisation, state-induced asset inflation, especially in property, and extraction.

Wealth surges that are weakly linked to the creation of new value play a largely malign role. Much of the wealth rise of recent times has been driven by economic activity aimed at personal enrichment, but in ways which have weakened economic strength and social resilience. Excessive house price inflation, fuelled by bad government policy and the growth of the size of inheritance, is one of the primary causes of the near halving of rates of home ownership among young people. Many large companies have been turned into cash cows for executives and shareholders through anti-competitive devices, the manipulation of corporate balance sheets, and the rigging of financial markets. The rising profits of recent times have disproportionately gone in payments to shareholders and executives, leaving little for private investment and improving wages.

The significance of the book lies in Byrne's political pedigree, a Labour insider making the case for higher wealth taxes. He is a self-acknowledged Blairite who ended his ministerial career as Chief Secretary to the Treasury in 2010. The book is part memoir, part polemic, and part confessional. Byrne now regrets the infamous, if light-hearted, note to his Treasury successor which read: "There's no money left." More importantly, he is a convert to measures that he opposed when in power.

The book is off-message. While both Keir Starmer and Rachel Reeves have, apart from some tiny tweaks, ruled out higher taxes on wealth, Byrne has joined the growing ranks of academics, thinktanks and campaigners calling for just that. It draws heavily on their work, but provides a valuable synthesis of the arguments.



The Inequality of Wealth: Why It Matters and How to Fix it,
Liam Byrne MP
(Apollo, £18)

Labour was born as an egalitarian party. At its first real opportunity, Labour, under Clem Attlee, helped deliver the historic achievement of peak equality. The unravelling of this achievement since 1980 has done widespread harm. Yet since 1997, Labour has mostly downplayed the party's historic egalitarian mission. Tony Blair was soft on the mega-rich. Ed Miliband revived concern over excessive inequality, but without much detail about how Labour would tackle it. Keir Starmer has yet to take a clear position on how much priority, if any, would be given to creating a fairer and more equal society.

Many of Britain's multiple social crises – from the doubling of child poverty to the erosion of life chances – can be linked to today's gaping income and wealth divides. Taxes on capital raise less than 4 per cent of all state revenue. In contrast, taxes on labour income raise 60 per cent. Given the often negative role played by how wealth is being accumulated, taxing capital so lightly compared with income makes, as Byrne acknowledges, no social or economic sense. There is an overwhelming case for a gentle rebalancing of the tax system from income to capital. The political obstacles to higher taxes on wealth are overstated, and if Labour wins, there could barely be a better opportunity for a reforming Labour chancellor to grasp this nettle.

Byrne calls for a mix of policies, from the equalisation of the rates of income and capital gains tax to the construction of a national wealth fund and a new system of universal basic capital based on new universal savings accounts.

With an election this year, these calls could hardly be more timely. Despite its anaemic economy, Britain is asset and resource rich. There is in fact plenty of money; it's just in the wrong places, and too often financing over-consumption by the rich.

For most of the last 300 years, the British state has been an agent of inequality. The brief postwar period of social democracy, which largely ended this historic pro-inequality bias, was a significant advance, but quickly reversed. Tackling wealth injustice is not just desirable but imperative. Britain will not be able to achieve significant social progress without harnessing at least part of its asset resource base for social reconstruction and the common good. **F**

Two typewriters that clicked as one

Michael Ward traces the political journey
of Beatrice and Sidney Webb



*Michael Ward is the author of *Unceasing War on Poverty: Beatrice and Sidney Webb and Their World*, published by The Conrad Press*

Beatrice and Sidney Webb – the firm of Webb, they dubbed themselves – were a remarkable couple: campaigners against poverty, architects of the welfare state, and early advocates of full employment policy and the National Health Service.

Both were leading members of the Fabian Society and cofounders of the London School of Economics and the *New Statesman*. These institutions – thinktank, university, weekly journal – gave the emerging Labour party its hinterland.

They met in 1890. Beatrice Potter was tall and graceful; Sidney Webb was short and stout. Beatrice grew up in a Cotswolds country house; restless about her privileged origins, she turned to social reform, then social research, making herself an independent career. Sidney's mother ran a hairdressing salon off London's Leicester Square. He worked in the upper civil service, arriving there via exceptional success in competitive examinations. In 1885 he had joined the Fabians – a small, recently-established socialist grouping.

In January 1890, Beatrice, researching cooperatives, was stuck for source material. She asked her cousin, activist and novelist Margaret Harkness, for advice. Margaret recommended Sidney: "He knows everything: when you go out for a walk with him he literally pours out information."

Margaret was right: immediately, Sidney wrote Beatrice a reading list, then sent the latest Fabian tract.

For Sidney, it was love at first sight. For Beatrice, things took longer; she carried scars from a long, unhappy, inconclusive relationship with the Liberal Unionist MP Joseph Chamberlain.

Nevertheless, in 1892 they married. For 30 years their home was 41 Grosvenor Road, Westminster, a Thames-side terrace house, where the Millbank Tower now stands. There they worked, every morning, sitting at the dining table, writing their books, first on trade unions, then on local government.

That same year, Sidney was elected to the London County Council. In months without council meetings, Sidney and Beatrice went to the countryside. They rented accommodation, inviting friends like Bernard Shaw or Bertrand Russell to join them. Work on the books was combined with strenuous exercise, walking or cycling.

After their marriage, their separate personalities somehow fused together. A contemporary described them as two typewriters that clicked as one. They wrote the books together; their politics evolved together. One editor thought they seemed "to have dropped their separate identities".

Their initial approach was permeation, which meant persuading other parties to adopt their ideas. This strategy helped Sidney develop secondary and technical education in London with Liberal LCC colleagues and nationally with Conservative ministers. Then, between 1912 and 1931, they moved towards expounding an explicit commitment to social democracy. After 1931, they argued that a new civilisation was developing in the Soviet Union.

The Webbs ran a political salon, entertaining frenetically but frugally. HG Wells described Grosvenor Road social life: "[Beatrice] mixed the obscurely efficient with the ill-instructed famous and the rudderless rich. [She] got together in one room more of the factors in our strange jumble of a public life than had ever met easily before."

In 1905 Beatrice joined a Royal Commission reviewing the Poor Law. She wrote a Minority Report, recommending abolition of the Poor Law, foreshadowing future full employment policy and a National Health Service. They ran a barnstorming, exhausting national campaign; the young Clement Attlee worked organising meetings.

But the pre-1914 Liberal government never backed their report. The Webbs concluded that permeation was finished; instead, they supported the fledgling Labour party. Beatrice called Labour "a poor thing, but our own".

Beatrice joined the Independent Labour party (ILP). After war started in 1914, Sidney became a key member of a committee representing Labour and trade union organisations, looking after the interests of the working civilian population.

During the war, Sidney helped transform Labour from a pressure group to a political party, ready to wield national power. Working with Leonard Woolf, he identified radical war aims for Labour – eliminating private arms manufacture, providing for peaceful settlement of disputes through international institutions. With Arthur Henderson, Sidney drafted Labour's first national programme: Labour and the New Social Order.

Henderson and Sidney also wrote Labour's constitution, which gave Labour its explicit socialist objective: "To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof...upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange."

Thus strengthened, Labour went on to form two minority governments in the 1920s; Sidney became an MP, serving in both Labour cabinets.

In 1923 Sidney spoke of Labour's inevitable gradualness: "Why, because we are idealists, should we be supposed to be idiots? For the Labour Party, it must be plain, socialism is rooted in political Democracy."

But the 1929–1931 Labour government tested the gradual approach to destruction. Battered by the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the subsequent slump, Labour had no solution to mass unemployment.

The Webbs began to question their approach: Labour, wrote Beatrice in early 1931, "has no policy – it has completely lost its bearings...What I am beginning to doubt is the 'inevitability of gradualness', or even the practicability of gradualness in the transition from a Capitalist to an equalitarian civilisation."

There was no new thinking; Beatrice thought she and Sidney were too old and tired. Maynard Keynes' General Theory did not appear until 1936.

In summer 1931, with calls for savage spending cuts, and an ultimatum from American bankers, the Labour government collapsed, replaced by an overwhelmingly Conservative coalition led by the ex-Labour MacDonald.

The Webbs' confidence in social democracy was shattered. They turned to the Soviet Union, where they thought a new civilisation was emerging. In 1932 they toured Russia and Ukraine. It was a managed visit. They went where their hosts wanted them to go; they saw what their hosts wanted them to see. Russia's ambassador vetted draft chapters of their book, *Soviet Communism, a New Civilisation*.

Sidney and Beatrice were not alone in their 1930s support for Russia. But it has damaged their reputations ever since. Even when people they knew died in Stalin's purges, the Webbs did not speak out.

In Britain, however, they stuck with Labour. Beatrice became president of the Fabians; she thought the British Communist party was a "ludicrous caricature of a revolutionary movement".

In 1939 she was appalled by the Hitler-Stalin pact. "So far as our faith in Soviet Communism is concerned, the last few days have been tragic," she said.

Both Webbs survived into old age. Plagued by kidney problems, Beatrice died in April 1943. After 1938, when he had a stroke, Sidney rarely left home. He died in October 1947.

Their ashes were interred in Westminster Abbey – the first couple buried there together. The American Life magazine covered the event under the headline: *British Bury Prophets*.

Clement Attlee, a Fabian and by then the Labour prime minister, gave the eulogy: "Sidney and Beatrice Webb, more widely than any others of their generation, changed for the better the condition of the masses of the people...They declared an unceasing war on poverty." ■

THE FABIAN QUIZ

THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

Joseph E Stiglitz



If you were to try to pinpoint the moment at which the seeds of the neoliberal revolution were sown, the publication of Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* in 1943 would be a strong contender. The book made an immediate impact, helping Churchill to lose the election by forming the basis for his claim that Clement Attlee's socialism would require a British Gestapo. But the full extent of its influence would not be felt until much later, when, both directly and through Hayek's intellectual scion Milton Friedman, *The Road to Serfdom* provided the ideological scaffold for the neoliberalism of Thatcher and Reagan.

Which is all rather odd, given how weak its central argument is. If government control of the economy inevitably led to tyranny, then Sweden – where at the time the government accounted for 63 per cent of GNP – should have become a dictatorship in short order. Yet the idea that freedom is married to markets has permeated deep into our discourse, including on the centre-left.

In *The Road to Freedom*, Nobel-prizewinning economist Joseph Stiglitz sets out to finally disabuse us of this notion, highlighting the ways in which the freedom of the market, far from

guaranteeing our own freedom, infringes on it. And what is worse, Stiglitz argues, deregulation of the economy does not even deliver the growth and enterprise we were promised.

With Labour on the cusp of power, Britain has a golden opportunity to throw off the tired free-market dogma that has shaped our society for nearly half a century. Tinkering around the edges will not be enough. Labour must embrace a theoretical shift as well as a practical one – with Stiglitz's reframing of freedom providing the blueprint for the necessary radicalism.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:

In the 2000 film American Psycho, which album is playing during Patrick Bateman's first on-screen murder?

Please email your answer and your address to review@fabian-society.org.uk

**ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED
NO LATER THAN 20 MAY 2024.**



Listings

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Meetings at Birmingham Friends Meeting House
Contact Luke John Davies:
bhamfabians@gmail.com

BOURNEMOUTH

Meetings at the Friends Meeting House,
Bournemouth BH5 1AH

BRIGHTON AND HOVE

Meetings at Friends Meeting House,
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2024 Fabian Society Membership Survey

We want to hear from you about your Fabian membership. Use the 2024 membership survey to tell us what we do well and what we could be doing better.

The survey has been sent via email, but if you haven't received it, scan this QR code to fill out before 23 April 2024.