FABIAN REVIEW

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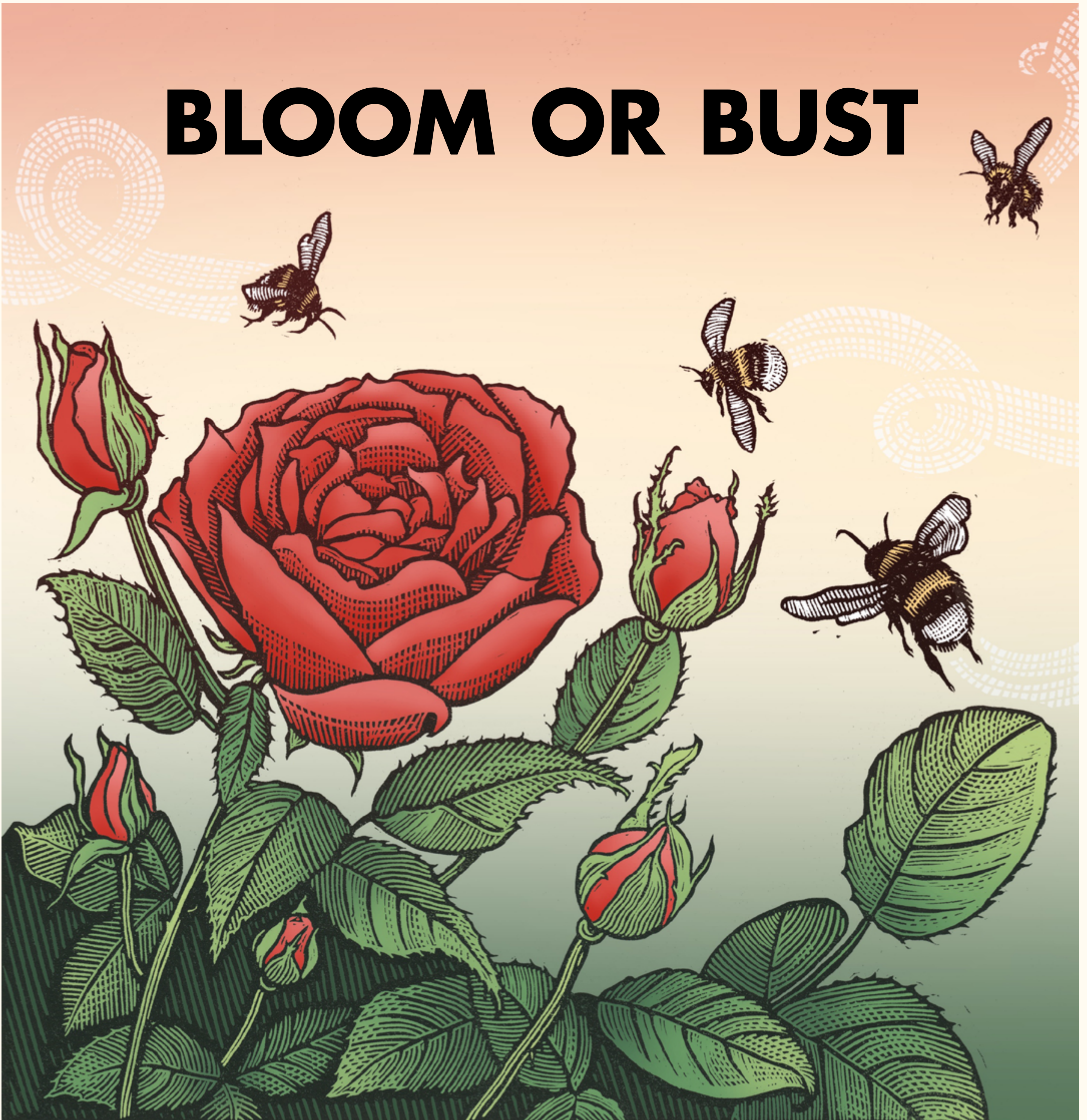

Quick wins and fundamental change with Tracy Brabin, Bev Craig, Richard Angell, Natalie Perera and more ***p10*** */ David Blunkett on Labour in power* ***p19*** */ Tariq Modood argues for a multicultural nationalism* ***p22*** */ Niall Devitt on Barbara Castle* ***p31***

SUNDAY 22 SEPTEMBER

13.30	Civility in Politics	Wales
15.00	Science, Innovation & Technology	Health & Social Care
16.30	Transport	Arts & Culture
18.00	UK & Europe	Environment & Climate
19.30	Devolution: A feminist perspective	

MONDAY 23 SEPTEMBER

11.30	Poll Position	Campaign to Commons
13.00	Inside No.10	Meet The Mayors
14.30	Housing	Work
16.00	Older People	Local Government & Communities
17.30	Economy & Growth	Foreign Affairs & Defence
20.00	Fabian Society Reception	

TUESDAY 24 SEPTEMBER

11.00	Justice	Children and the Care System
12.30	Coast & Country	Scotland
14.00	Prime Minister's Speech: Watch Party	
16.45	Education & Children	Business & Trade
18.15	Meet the Policy Groups	Young People

FABIAN REVIEW

Volume 136—No.3

Leader
Andrew Harrop **4** Buds of change

Shortcuts
Christabel Cooper **5** Right noise
Nadia Whittome MP **6** Sorry legacy
Claire Hanna MP **6** New foundations
Despina Alexiadou **7** Capital offence
Beccy Cooper MP **8** Making waves
Ten-Herng Lai **9** A break with the past

Cover story
Eloise Sacares, Melanie Smallman, Tracy Brabin, Paul Swinney, Sasjkia Otto, Bev Craig, Richard Angell, Oliver Walsh, Natalie Perera **10** Your time starts now

Interview
Iggy Wood **19** Voice of experience

Feature
Tariq Modood **22** In harmony
Diane Coyle **24** Driving success
Joe Peck **26** Going for growth
Martin Plaut **28** Changing times
Maggie Browning **30** Back to basics

Essay
Niall Devitt **31** A great example

Fabian Society section
34 Research round-up
34 Noticeboard
35 Listings
35 The Fabian quiz

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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Buds of change

In his last leader column after 13 years as Fabian general secretary, *Andrew Harrop* argues that Labour has the opportunity to transform our country

In October, I step down as Fabian Society general secretary after 13 years. In that time, life in the UK has grown worse in many ways. There is more poverty and sickness, housing is harder to afford, and most public services are worse at meeting needs. Through Brexit, the country has severed its bonds with our nearest neighbours just as global risks are rising. And inequalities in income, opportunity, wealth and health are as bad as they were in 2011.

Even where Britain has moved forward, progress has been too slow. Our economic engine is stuck in first gear with productivity, earnings and living standards barely growing. Increases in life expectancy had slackened even before Covid-19. And while progress has been made on carbon emissions, the pace is not fast enough to meet our net zero commitments.

At least Tory chaos, ideology and inertia has not broken the things that make Britain great. As a country we still have genuine economic strengths, outsized cultural and scientific impact, respected institutions and soft power. These are foundations on which to build.

The public backlash to this summer's far-right riots also proved that most people are at ease with the diverse Britain of today. Our model of migration and integration is not perfect, but it is better than in most other countries. When the history books are written, the right's recent anti-woke turn will be seen as a weird and feeble hold-out against the onward march of social liberalism.

The last 13 years have been a painful period for Labour as well as for the country. At first the party struggled to come to terms with defeat. Ed Miliband's leadership saw lots of creative policy thinking. But it was undermined by internal conflict and his party never convinced when speaking to persuadable Tory voters.

In the pain of the unexpectedly bad 2015 defeat, members placed heart over head and elected Jeremy Corbyn. That experiment in putting protest ahead of power and appealing to the converted was always doomed to fail. But enough members who reflected the pragmatic Fabian tradition stayed to rescue the party from the ashes, and the society played a big part in anchoring people to their party.

The road back towards electability under Keir Starmer was slow but steady – and down to luck as well as guile and stamina. But critically, when the Conservatives imploded, Labour looked like a competent and reassuring government-in-waiting.

Across these long years of opposition, the Fabians were there as a space for debate, a source of ideas and an incubator for future talent in the movement. We take great pride in the contribution we made to Labour's victory. As I depart, the society is in stronger health than for many years.

Labour's next task is to address the maladies that have scarred the country for the last decade and beyond. In signing up to five long-term missions the party is seeking to drive growth and decarbonisation, and to build public services that secure opportunity, security and health. The promise is of big change over a decade, through competent administration and pragmatic, incremental steps. It is very Fabian.

But in next month's budget the party must avoid too much pain today for jam tomorrow. Saying that things will get worse before they get better may help to manage expectations. But following this last lost decade, the new government must also bring help fast where it is needed most. The wealthy can afford to pay more in taxes – and when it comes to plugging holes in our public services, kick-starting investment and alleviating acute hardship, the time to act is now. **F**

Shortcuts

RIGHT NOISE

The Reform threat can't be discounted. But Labour should focus on staying ahead of the Tories — *Christabel Cooper*

The populist right are on the march across continental Europe and America, often trampling centre-left parties in the process. Here in the UK, violent far-right rioters recently took to the streets, claiming that their anger was representative of wider public concerns, particularly around immigration – with almost all of the areas experiencing riots returning Labour MPs in the last general election. Against this backdrop, some in Labour are looking nervously at the Reform party. So how much of a threat to Labour does it pose?

On the night of the general election, Nigel Farage declared: "We're targeting Labour votes. We're coming for Labour." There is reason to think this was no idle threat: of the 98 seats where Reform sits in second place, 89 are Labour held. Post-election analysis by the thinktank More in Common shows overlap between Labour and Reform voters: of those who voted Labour, 15 per cent considered voting Reform. If every one of them had done so, Labour could have lost around 60 seats at the last general election (mostly to the Conservatives).

But More in Common's numbers also show that the overlap between Conservative and Reform voters is much bigger. Nearly a third (29 per cent) of those who voted Conservative thought about voting for Reform, and over a third (36 per cent) of those who voted Reform thought about voting Conservative.

Looking at who Reform voters are helps to explain this. Although (like Labour voters) they have lower incomes than average, they also tend to be older and more likely to own their own homes outright. The overwhelming majority of Reform supporters think that immigration is one of the top issues facing the country, and prioritise it over the economy. British Election Study data shows that Reform voters also tend to be right-wing on other 'culture' issues. Three-quarters support the death penalty, and nearly 90 per cent agree that statues of historical figures should not be removed even if they have connections to the slave trade.

On economics, 29 per cent of Reform voters agreed that: "Government should try to make incomes equal". This is a higher percentage than Conservative voters, but far lower than the 66 per cent of Labour supporters who expressed support for this idea. And Reform voters were even less in favour of higher taxes and higher public spending than Conservative voters.

In short, those who voted Reform in 2024 are fairly economically right-wing and very culturally right-wing. Their views are in line with a party whose agenda is principally concerned with reducing immigration, but which also touted an insurance-based model for the NHS, supported tax cuts for businesses, and not only said it wanted to keep private school fees free from VAT, but proposed giving extra tax relief to independent schools.

To truly 'come for Labour', Reform would probably need to shift away from economically right-wing policies and emulate successful European hard-right populists such as Marine Le Pen. Her National Rally party in France combines hostility to immigration with support for higher wages and benefits for French workers, and targets younger voters by promising government help to get on the housing ladder. Even in its current incarnation, Reform's vote could have considerable room for expansion, conceivably to as high as 28 per cent, which is the total number of people who said they considered voting for them at the last election. Numbers like these could reduce Labour to a minority government.

Yet such a shift would simultaneously almost wipe out the Conservatives, because Reform would be taking the bulk of their new votes from the right. And it is also unlikely. It is difficult to imagine a more favourable set of circumstances for Reform than those of 2024. A deeply unpopular government went into the election presiding

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over an asylum system that is demonstrably out of control. Then, Nigel Farage returned in a blaze of publicity to lead the party in the middle of the campaign. So it is entirely possible that the 2024 result is not far from the high-water mark of Reform's reach. Current Conservative voters are divided in their views of Nigel Farage, and in the wake of the riots his popularity among this group seems to have fallen.

This analysis holds its own problems for Labour. If the third of Reform voters who say they considered voting Conservative returned to the Tories, Labour could lose around 50 seats, although these losses would not be enough to overturn Labour's majority (as some proponents of a Conservative "unite the right" strategy seem to fondly imagine).

In the end, for both of the two biggest parties, the main battle will continue to be in seats where Labour and the Conservatives are in direct competition, and the most important group of voters will continue to be Labour/Conservative switchers. Reform might be second to Labour in 89 seats, but the Conservatives are second in 219. The Labour-Conservative seats are also more vulnerable, with Labour holding smaller majorities than those in the Labour-Reform constituencies.

Against the background of a highly volatile and distrustful electorate, Nigel Farage's threat to Labour cannot be dismissed. But while a more successful Reform party could damage Labour, the threat he poses to the Conservatives could be existential. F

Christabel Cooper is director of research at Labour Together and a former Labour councillor in Hammersmith and Fulham

SORRY LEGACY

Labour must counter the Tory obsession with 'sick note Britain' — *Nadia Whittome MP*

After 14 years of Tory governments, Labour has inherited a country that is deeply unwell. Rising poverty, a crumbling NHS, a mishandled pandemic and the gutting of communities have left Britain in a health crisis. The number of working-age adults receiving at least one health-related benefit has increased by a million since 2019. The number of people who are economically inactive due to ill health has reached 2.8 million. Crucially, two in three people deemed unable to work by the DWP cite mental health concerns in their claim.

Even the Tories were forced to admit that this situation was unsustainable. Yet rather than addressing its root causes, their preferred solution was blaming the ill and disabled. Britain's "sick note culture" must end, proclaimed Rishi Sunak back in April, in a speech that confusingly conflated those on sick leave, people claiming out-of-work benefits and those receiving Personal Independence Payments. A particular target were people with mental health conditions, accused by the then-prime minister of "over-medicalising everyday challenges". In what some described as the unofficial start of the Conservative election campaign, Sunak promised an overhaul of the benefit and fit note systems to make them even more hostile, in particular for those struggling with mental ill-health.

Fortunately, the Tories decisively lost on 4 July, but their toxic campaign could have lasting consequences. Mental health charities raised the alarm that Conservative rhetoric and policy proposals threatened to reverse hard-won progress on recognising mental illness as a disability. Now it's up to Labour to undo that damage.

In reality, our benefits system is far from lenient – it's punitive. So punitive, in fact, that a 2016 UN report concluded that the UK was committing "grave and systemic violations" of disabled people's rights. A follow-up report earlier this year found no progress. In 2020, the National Audit Office found that at least 69 suicides since 2014 had been linked to the DWP's actions, and cautioned that the real number could be far higher.

Our approach to supporting people into work should be driven by evidence, not prejudice and press headlines. Studies have consistently shown that benefit sanctions don't work, and often make things worse. For nearly three years, the last Conservative government tried to suppress the DWP's own report, which revealed that fines imposed on claimants not only fail to increase employment, but damage both their progress in finding work and subsequent earning prospects. This is entirely logical: it is hard to focus on the job search with an empty stomach, lacking even the most basic economic security.

These findings echo the results of the UK's most extensive study of welfare conditionality, published five years earlier. It also laid bare the devastating personal effects of sanctions, in particular for disabled people. Acute hardship and poverty can make recovery, or effectively managing one's symptoms, all but impossible. This is self-evidently true in the case of people living with mental illness: desperate economic conditions only add to the emotional struggles they already face. Rather than encouraging claimants into work, restricting people's access to benefits destroys and even costs lives.

But it is not just those out of work who the Tories decided to target. As one of their final acts in power, they published a green paper outlining suggested reforms to Personal Independence Payments (PIP). Contrary to misconceptions, whether a person is eligible for PIP has nothing to do with whether they are employed; PIP is a monthly payment designed to help with the extra costs associated with illness or disability. Under the Tories' proposals, instead of regular cash payments, claimants could receive vouchers or one-off grants – or, in particular in the case of those with "milder" mental health conditions, lose their eligibility altogether, and be pointed towards treatment instead.

There is nothing inherently wrong with recommending someone try talking therapy where it might be beneficial – providing that it is in fact available. However, it is no replacement for financial support. PIP is a lifeline for many people living with mental health conditions: whether one struggles with everyday tasks and requires a support worker, uses the funds to pay for specialist therapies, or needs a taxi home following a panic attack. For many, losing it would greatly limit their ability to live independent and fulfilling lives.

The consultation on the green paper closed in July, and it is now up to the government to decide the next steps. I hope that it listens to disability and mental health charities, which have been clear: the proposed reforms belong in the dustbin of history.

Unlike the Tories, Labour does not dismiss Britain's mental health crisis – we want to tackle it head-on. Our pledges to hire 8,500 additional mental health staff, guarantee access to NHS treatment within a month and fund community youth mental health hubs are an excellent place to start. Another part of our strategy should be rejecting the Tories' dangerous proposals and instead changing our benefits system: from one designed to punish those who are struggling, to one that enables people to live dignified lives and supports them to recover. **F**

Nadia Whittome is the Labour MP for Nottingham East

NEW FOUNDATIONS

A Labour government can help restore stability to Northern Ireland — *Claire Hanna MP*

When it became clear that Labour had won a landslide majority in the general election, bringing an end to 14 years of Conservative reign, there was relief and optimism in Northern Ireland.

Successive governments since 2010 had been marred by a chaotic and irresponsible approach to governing, not least in Northern Ireland, where again and again the Tories demonstrated a lack of understanding, respect or balance – perhaps most starkly felt during the Brexit years, but also evidenced by the introduction of the toxic and universally unpopular Troubles Legacy Bill.

Labour's election represents opportunity, greater stability and a chance to reset relationships within and across these two islands.

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It was of course under a Labour government that the Good Friday agreement was brokered and there remains an institutional memory of what went before it – with a palpable sense within Labour of the fragility and complexity of a society still getting to grips with its past.

Labour's actions in the weeks since the election, including a visit to Belfast on Starmer's third day in office, have already demonstrated a government prepared to treat Northern Ireland with respect and care, including a practical approach to relationship building with the Irish government and with the EU. History shows that London and Dublin operating as friends and equals is the best path to success here. So, the mood is better – but tough decisions lie ahead, albeit ones likely to be easier to tackle for a government focused on finding solutions instead of milking problems.

Near the top of Labour's agenda should be the stability of the North's political institutions. With five of the last seven years wasted in political stalemate, when first Sinn Féin and then the DUP collapsed Stormont, reforms to the Northern Ireland Act to prevent one party veto are possible and necessary.

Of course, progress can be made prior to institutional reform. The stakes are high: years of instability and the never-ending cycle of crisis and collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive have left public services in Northern Ireland in a bad way. We now need to see the Northern Ireland Executive get serious and move beyond positive words and symbolism and into delivery. The people of Northern Ireland need to see prioritisation and meaningful change and that must start with the publication of a programme for government, of which there is no sign over 200 days after the restoration of Stormont. People are glad to see parties working together but politics is still largely directionless, whilst the list of challenges grow and the solutions become more complex. Westminster has a role to play here, too: even the last Tory government agreed the need for recalibration of the way Northern Ireland is funded, reflecting demographic need and economies of scale.

There are other areas of opportunity for Northern Ireland with a Labour government in Westminster. Post-Brexit trade frictions are yet to be resolved, and there is low-hanging fruit to harvest through EU and UK agreements like the introduction of a veterinary agreement and legislation which would make it easier to align product standards with the EU.

Happily, we're looking forward to three years without an election. This hasn't been the case since 2011, with ten elections in the last decade. The conditions for delivery are there; there must now be action, and Labour has a key role to play in ensuring that happens. **F**

Claire Hanna is the Social Democratic and Labour party (SDLP) MP for Belfast South and Mid Down

CAPITAL OFFENCE

Labour should consider increasing capital gains tax to raise much-needed funds — *Despina Alexiadou*

Keir Starmer's landslide victory on 4 July comes with the burden of having to take some grave policy decisions. Inaction is not an option – the country is in need of major interventions.

Take health, for example. Just 24 per cent of Britons are satisfied with the NHS, while the majority (52 per cent) are dissatisfied. This is the lowest level of satisfaction recorded since the survey began in 1983. While the UK ranks well below the OECD (Organisation of for Economic Cooperation and Development) average with respect to deaths from heart-attacks and strokes, it stands far above the OECD average with respect to deaths caused by cancer. Obesity has grown steadily, with a quarter of the population now classified as obese and three quarters as overweight, including 10 and 11 year old children. Obesity rates are significantly higher among people who are classified as economically deprived.

During the election campaign, Keir Starmer was careful not to 'scare' wealthy people or high earners. Instead, he concentrated on policies designed to help spur economic growth. And so far, the government has not been particularly active in introducing new policies, with the exception of the bill to establish Great British Energy. This is not necessarily a bad thing if this delay is due to careful planning rather than rushing into half-baked policies. Drafting policies that encourage innovation and increase productivity across the country is a non-trivial challenge. Yet ultimately, the government will have to raise money; growth requires functioning public services and government investment, which has been way below levels in other G7 countries since at least the late 1990s. With revenues lagging behind even existing expenditure commitments, how will the government fund its programme for change?

The elephant in the room is tax. Rates of taxation on income and profits

have declined over time while indirect taxes like VAT have risen. This has led to a rise in post-tax, disposable income inequality, which in turn has implications for decisions about which taxes Labour should now raise. Two categories of taxes are the obvious target: wealth and capital income taxes. Wealth taxes are paid on all the stock of wealth of an individual or household, whereas capital income tax is tax on the flow of income that is generated from sources such as rental income, dividend income or selling assets. It has been argued that raising capital taxes to similar levels as income tax could raise billions of pounds. One tax in particular has drawn more attention in the UK since the early 2020s: capital gains tax, explained by the (now abolished) Office of Tax Simplification as "…very broadly, a tax on the difference between an asset's value when acquired and its value at disposal."

With a 20 per cent marginal top rate, the UK's capital gains tax is relatively low compared to similar European countries. Germany, for example, imposes a 26 per cent rate; France levies 30 per cent. Rates have fluctuated significantly over time, with Nigel Lawson aligning them with income tax in the late eighties before Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling decoupled them in an attempt to spur innovation and entrepreneurship. Whether the lower rates have had a positive effect on private investment is unclear. While there is some empirical evidence that cuts to capital gains tax have an immediate positive effect in the form of new equity issuances by the firms affected, it is questionable whether these effects generalise to higher levels of corporate investment in the longer term. Scholars highlight that other factors may matter more to entrepreneurs when deciding whether to invest, such as the overall investment climate and economic prospects in the economy. Property and wealth taxes have advantages over capital gains tax in terms of economic growth, but as mentioned earlier, wealth taxes are particularly unpopular and have been repealed in many countries. Overall, it is quite unlikely that moderate increases in capital taxation will have significant negative effects on private investment. If government analysis suggests that increasing the rate of CGT would lead to higher revenue, the government should allocate it to badly needed-public investment.

Dr Despina Alexiadou is a reader at the Department of Government and Public Policy, University of Strathclyde

MAKING WAVES

Coastal communities are facing a health crisis. Our political system is to blame — *Beccy Cooper MP*

It is a joy to represent my adopted home of Worthing as the first Labour MP for Worthing West. Our dynamic seaside town has a thriving creative and cultural scene, the ever-changing sea and historic seafront, and easy access to the South Downs, neighbouring towns and the beautiful villages of West Sussex.

Yet coastal towns like mine are facing a health crisis. The Chief Medical Officer's 2021 report, Health in Coastal Communities, found that coastal areas have some of the worst health outcomes in England, with low life expectancy and high rates of major diseases, such as cardiovascular disease. More than half of the local authorities with the highest rates of heroin-related deaths are coastal.

Data on health inequalities and inequity is a further indication that decisions made by those of us in a position of influence are not yet working to maximise the health and wellbeing of the people we represent. In Worthing West, a woman living in one of our poorest areas will live an average of 8.3 years less than a woman living in one of our wealthiest areas, and for the population as a whole, the time spent in poor health is increasing. Inequalities in life expectancy are increasing, especially for women.

Our healthcare system certainly needs more resources – but on its own, this will not be enough. I got into politics, first as a local councillor and council leader and now as an MP, because as a public health doctor I know that social, economic, environmental and structural factors affect our health. We know, for example, that exposure to poor housing conditions, including damp, cold, mould and noise, is strongly associated with poor physical and mental health. People do not thrive without clean water, clean air, access to green space and good food. Our bodies become far less resilient to illness when these things are not available to us, and the same is true of housing, education and jobs.

Looking through this lens, coastal communities face wicked problems; challenges that are complex, interconnected and difficult to solve. Coastal towns are more likely to have higher levels of deprivation than non-coastal towns, to suffer from skills shortages and limited access to further and higher education. We have a disproportionately high number of people claiming disability and sickness benefits.

A lack of affordable housing and the increase in cost of living has hit coastal communities hard, with 2,880 households waiting for social housing in Worthing and Adur alone. Coastal towns face hard constraints on housebuilding and need increased investment alongside planning reforms to help local authorities address the dire need for more social rented homes.

Isolation, deprivation, levels of transience and homelessness, poor quality housing, outward migration of young people and gridlocked transport systems are not unique to coastal towns. But these characteristics come together with the nature of our coastal economies to create a need for focused support for coastal regeneration and urgent investment in health and social care. We need joined-up solutions and increased funding to support coastal communities.

Of course, the solutions will not all come from central government. Sussex benefits from strong working relationships across different areas which recognise that we cannot solve our challenges alone. The Greater Brighton Economic Board leads joint work to accelerate our journey to delivering green energy, improve food systems locally, and strengthen access to our digital and creative industries. The Sussex Visitor Economy Initiative has ambitions to grow a sustainable year-round tourism industry that can provide increased prosperity and jobs for the region. The Living Coast UNESCO Biosphere and the recently launched Sussex Bay are projects of radical collaboration to conserve and restore our blue nature, ensure sustainable socioeconomic development and fund nature research.

I said in my maiden speech to parliament that, for too long, our politics has been making people sick. Reducing inequality and inequity and helping local economies to thrive across the nation will allow everyone to do better. The politics of health is the narrative of our nation. A government which focuses on the health and wellbeing of the people we serve is a government that will enable us to rise together to face the challenges of both today and tomorrow. **F**

Dr Beccy Cooper is the Labour MP for Worthing West

A BREAK WITH THE PAST

The choices we make about commemorating our history matter — *Ten-Herng Lai*

Over the past decade, many statues commemorating problematic historical figures have become forcefully contested. In one of the most prominent instances, after a statue of Cecil Rhodes was removed in South Africa, the Rhodes Must Fall movement quickly spread to Oriel College, Oxford. Despite the recommendation of an independent commission, the college eventually decided to keep Rhodes' statue, citing pressure from donors, financial costs, and regulatory obstacles. Then, the Black Lives Matter Movement led to protests over the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston at Bristol Harbour. The statue was defaced, pulled down, and dragged and thrown into the docks – where ships of his company had set sail on the voyage to commit one of the most systematic violations of human rights in history – before eventually being fished out to be displayed, lying down, in a museum.

While such protests provided the Tory government with an excellent opportunity to reflect upon the legacies of historical injustice, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), perhaps unsurprisingly, instead portrayed the confrontation as an assault on British history and identity, effectively intertwining Britishness with past wrongdoings. This unreflective attitude crystallised into the "retain and explain" policy in 2021 and subsequent 2023 guidance, which created a de facto ban on the removal of the glorification of wrongdoers: "Government policy is that these commemorative heritage assets should remain in situ." Despite allowing relocation in "rare and exceptional" circumstances, the government retains the power to veto decisions.

The purported rationale behind the policy and guidance is that our society should not conceal negative aspects of our chequered past, but rather learn from them. While this may seem reasonable at first glance, it overlooks the primary function of statues: to honour. This approach leaves many morally and politically contentious issues regarding the honouring of the immoral unaddressed.

Philosophers have dedicated significant efforts to theorising the complex issues surrounding the honouring of immoral figures within public spaces. The simple existence of a statue does not necessarily imply that our community admires the historical figure it represents, especially if it is situated in a museum, where the context implies it is merely a historical artefact. However, when a statue remains prominently displayed on a pedestal in a remarkable public location, it typically signifies an endorsement by relevant authorities, whether it be the state, a university or another institution. Such an endorsement, according to different philosophers, creates several thorny issues.

Some argue that for a state with a history of imperialism and colonisation, honouring wrongdoers via statues contradicts the state's duty to repudiate past wrongdoing. To avoid sending an ambiguous message, the thinking goes, the best way to proceed would be to remove statues of the immoral. Others believe that these statues can help embed crucial lessons into our daily lives, acknowledging our capacity for serious wrongdoing. If you subscribe to this world view, statues – perhaps defaced – can serve as valuable reminders: while the immoral figure is no longer honoured, a clear lesson is still conveyed.

My view is that retaining statues maintains a focus on the 'positive' deeds of those who are being honoured, without addressing the source of their power to buy their way into the hall of fame. It reduces certain aspects of history – slavery – to little more than a footnote. To deliver a better public space, I believe that statues of wrongdoers should be replaced by those of victims or resistors.

What we ought to do next, then, may not align with "retain and explain." The new government should consider reassessing this policy and the relevant guidance. First, removal should become a viable option, instead of being allowed only in "rare and exceptional" circumstances. Second, along with removal, certain measures should be encouraged to properly capture the values which the DCMS has only paid lip service to, including replacing contested heritage assets with monuments of victims or resistors. Third, should removal prove unfeasible, tainted commemorations should at least be accompanied by highly salient forms of counter-messages or artistic interventions, so as to make it clear that the state, universities or other institutions do not condone historical wrongdoings.

It is continuing to honour the immoral that truly represents an attempt to whitewash our history. By instead honouring those who suffered from and fought against injustice, we can confront it. **F**

Dr Ten-Herng Lai is a lecturer of philosophy at the University of Stirling

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Your time starts now

The new government has five years to prove its worth. The Fabian Review asked policymakers how they would make Britain greener, demolish barriers to change, and seize easy wins to improve lives while spending less

Five years to save the planet

© David Hawgood/Wikimedia Commons

On the bright side
by Eloise Sacares

Labour must cover Britain's rooftops with solar panels

Labour's manifesto pledged to bring down household bills and tackle the climate crisis. Only a month into government, they are already taking action to fulfil these promises, with the de facto ban on onshore wind ripped up, a national wealth fund created, and three new large-scale solar farms approved.

Now, even more ambitious plans for solar power are being considered. Ministers are currently looking at introducing rooftop solar panel requirements for new-build properties from next year. This would be a crucial step towards achieving their clean power mission. But they should go further still, by mandating the installation of solar panels on certain existing buildings, such as large commercial buildings.

There are four reasons to prioritise rooftop solar. First, and most obviously, it would generate much-needed renewable energy. The rate of rooftop installation needs to double if we are to hit the capacity target of 70GW by 2035 set by the previous Conservative government.

Second, this clean energy would be generated in the parts of the country that need it most. Currently, most renewable power is generated in the north and then transmitted to the south. Yet transmission lines are so congested that homes in the south are frequently unable to access this cleaner power, forcing them to remain reliant on fossil fuels. With increased rooftop solar capacity, we could harness our sunnier southern climate and our windier northern climate in tandem to reduce bottlenecks that stop some of the most densely populated parts of the country from accessing cleaner energy.

Third, the opportunity cost of using rooftops is much lower than the alternatives.

While large solar energy farms have many advantages, they are often locally controversial. They also put solar power in tension with other priorities such as food security and nature conservation. Rooftop solar panels, in contrast, repurpose pre-existing space that has little alternative use.

Fourth, there are major economic benefits to rooftop solar for households. The installation of solar panels could help homeowners of a typical new build home save between £974 to £1,151. At a time when the cost of living still dominates the political agenda and may well decide the fate of the next election, there is more no important time for a Labour government to be legislating for cheaper household energy.

Finally, while we work to curb emissions, we also need to become more resilient to the impacts of climate change that are already happing. Overheated buildings are becoming more common in the UK because developments are often not well-designed for warmer temperatures. Such overheating can have major implications for the health of vulnerable people – such as older people or those with certain health conditions. But solar panels can help here, too, by shading roofs from the sun and so reducing internal building temperatures. This effect could help protect our health in homes and workplaces, and even improve productivity during heatwaves.

Of course, rooftop solar will not work for all buildings – some roofs are shaded or else not strong enough to support the panels. But for those buildings that it could work for, it is a currently an enormous missed opportunity. To achieve 100 per cent clean power by 2030, we must install solar panels on as many rooftops as possible. F

Eloise Sacares is a researcher at the Fabian Society

On your marks
by Melanie Smallman

There is no time to waste in
the fight against climate change

July 2024 registered the world's hottest day ever, according to the World Meteorological Organisation. There is little doubt that our climate is changing, and according to the United Nations, we have just five years to half emissions if we are to keep this change within liveable limits. Whether or not we will face devastating climate change will be decided during the current Labour government.

The pressure is on. Taking the action necessary to keep climate change within liveable limits is a marathon task that needs sprinter's pace, and Labour has started at speed – removing the ban on onshore wind in England in the first week; increasing the budget for this year's renewable energy auction by more than 50 per cent; and setting up a new onshore wind industry taskforce to identify and deliver the actions needed to meet the 2030 renewables target. A new bill to set up Great British Energy was announced in the King's speech, promising to boost investment in renewable energy projects, including offshore wind. And with Ed Miliband back at the helm of the UK team in November's COP29 talks in Baku, the UK looks set to restore its reputation as an international leader in climate action. Importantly, the landslide election victory – with the Green Prosperity Plan front and centre – has afforded Labour the public and political mandate to act.

Beyond decarbonising the energy sector, there is plenty more to do. In its July 2024 report to parliament, the UK's Committee on Climate Change said we need to speed up and broaden the sectors targeted for emission reductions in order to meet the Paris Agreement. In particular, transport and buildings saw significant rollbacks of low-carbon policy under the Tories.

While the focus for Labour's transport team is currently on trains and buses, they will nevertheless need to take a hard look at private vehicle use too – shifting people and goods to electric vehicles is necessary if we are to double emission reductions from transport by the end of the decade. Falling prices and running costs for electric vehicles will push consumers in the right direction, but with the clock ticking, improving infrastructure and incentivising replacement (especially for vans) will be needed to accelerate the pace of change.

Buildings are the second-largest source of emissions in the UK, so fossil fuel-based heating also needs to be phased out quickly. The UK has over 30m households, but only around 60,000 heat pumps were sold in 2023. Research has shown that one of the biggest barriers for consumers is lack of awareness. Independent and authoritative advice to guide consumers and building public confidence will be key. But with heat pumps costing four to five times more than a conventional gas or oil boiler, and only functioning properly in well-insulated homes, subsidies and low-interest loans for energy efficiency and low carbon heating will be necessary too. As we found with Labour's previous boiler replacement scheme, this is a great opportunity to reduce emissions while simultaneously tackling fuel poverty and boosting business. Attracting heat pump manufacturing to the UK is estimated to be worth more than £5.5bn to the economy, while installation could create new jobs without making the existing gas boiler workforce obsolete.

The next five years offers an urgent and unique chance to tie environmental objectives to the Treasury's ambitions for growth and bring down bills for households in the long term. Labour finally has its hands on the powers needed to make change a reality. Run, don't walk! F

Dr Melanie Smallman is professor of science and technology studies at UCL. She is the former chair of SERA, Labour's environment campaign, and a member of Labour's national policy forum

Fixing the fundamentals

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Devolution delivers
by Tracy Brabin

Labour's devolution plans will lead to a fundamental rewiring of England's political system

When Keir Starmer talks about "fixing the foundations" of our country, he means it.

Just one week after his election, our new prime minister invited the country's 12 metro mayors to Downing Street. He knows that to achieve his mission of the highest sustained growth in the G7, he must re-empower the regions of England to deliver it.

This means an English Devolution bill, spreading power and opportunity to every community; single funding settlements, with greater freedoms and flexibilities over local growth funding; and a Council of Nations and Regions, so that the local leaders who know their areas best can take a seat at the national decision-making table.

Taken together, these three initiatives will be gamechangers for the UK economy. Never before has central government looked so closely to its regional partners to help it shape and realise its vision for the country.

Since 1999, devolution has rapidly transformed the way our political systems work in the UK. Ordinary people have been brought closer to the decisions which affect their lives. But the arguments for deeper and wider devolution aren't just political; they're economic. According to the Institute for Government, decisions taken outside of Westminster and Whitehall lead to better outcomes and greater returns on investment.

Yet the full potential of English devolution has been held back by an outdated political system which bakes in the neglect of villages, towns and cities outside of the M25. Our country is simply too centralised to harness the opportunities and tackle the challenges facing each of our regions. From our transport networks to our housing stock, Britain's infrastructure is creaking under the weight of over a decade of underinvestment.

But devolution can and will be the green shoot of hope. Whichever of the government's missions you look at – kickstarting growth, unleashing green energy, tackling crime and anti-social behaviour, providing opportunities to young people, and rebuilding public services – mayors and combined authorities are perfectly placed to deliver.

The prime minister recognises this, and so has tasked us all with developing ambitious, long-term plans for growth – plans which identify barriers to opportunity and outline the tools we need to overcome them.

In return, the Labour government will equip us with those tools – the powers and support we need to get Britain building again, repair our crumbling infrastructure, and create the well-paid jobs our communities need and deserve.

The reason for this new approach is simple: elected mayors can respond more quickly and effectively to local challenges than the centre, because we understand the places that elected us.

We know what skills courses our residents need to secure well-paid jobs in the local labour market. We know what support our small and medium sized businesses need to succeed and scale. We know the challenges our commuters face getting to work quickly and reliably. And we know how many new homes we need to build, and where.

Here in West Yorkshire, we're bringing buses back under public control. Consulting on new tram routes to better connect our region. Building the affordable and sustainable homes our families need. Tackling violence against women and girls. And creating a region of learning and creativity where everyone can get the skills they need to succeed.

With greater devolution of powers locally, we can do so much more.

Labour's plans will deliver a fundamental rewiring of England's political system. It will ensure that the national industrial strategy works for all of our communities, and gives every part of the country the chance to take on devolved powers, allowing them to take the bold decisions that are right for their areas.

The devolution decade is upon us. It couldn't be more needed. **F**

Tracy Brabin is the Labour mayor of West Yorkshire

Home advantage
by Paul Swinney

To deliver the homes we so desperately need, the planning system must be reformed

A big part of Labour's election campaign was centred around getting Britain building again. And they have wasted no time – Chancellor Rachel Reeves' claim to have advanced the planning system further in 72 hours than the Conservatives did in 14 years is a bold claim, but she did, in very short order, reverse some of the less helpful changes made during the previous parliament.

But why have Labour singled out an area that for decades has been a political quagmire? It is largely because the existing planning system, brought in just after the second world war, is acting like a handbrake on the UK economy.

Centre for Cities' estimates suggest that, since the introduction of the modern planning system, the UK has built up a backlog of 4.3m 'missing homes' that should have been built but were not. This is because – unlike in Europe – our discretionary, case-by-case planning system means proposed developments can fit all the rules and the requirements of a local plan and still be rejected. And that is to say nothing of the commercial space that hasn't been built over this period.

In case that still all sounds very tangential, let's have a look at how a housing shortage has impacted Bristol, one of the UK's stronger-performing cities. From 2004 to 2021, its economic output almost doubled, fuelled by an increase in skilled graduates who were able to fill the vacancies in the city's fast-growing digital, science and technology sectors.

Even before 2004, Bristol had a housing crisis, with housing being some of the most expensive in the country and homes per head being lower than the national average. Unsurprisingly, the economic growth of the past two decades has exacerbated the pressure. While the city has built more homes, with the total number of residences increasing by almost a fifth, this has been nowhere near enough to meet the ever-growing demand in the city. The result is that house price growth has far outstripped national increases and local increases in wages, and there are now even fewer homes per person than there were in 2004. The lowest-income families are squeezed the most. On average, the cost of a house was 11.7 times the average annual wage in 2022, above the national average of 9.8. But the lowest quartile housing cost around 13 times the average wages of those in the bottom quartile of earnings.

A look at where houses have and haven't been built in the city gives an indication as to why. Bristol is one of the least dense of all of the UK's largest cities, which as a group are much less dense than their western European counterparts. And, outside the city centre, there has been very little building within Bristol's existing footprint over the last two decades – most neighbourhoods look exactly like they did 20 years ago. The discretionary nature of the planning system makes this very difficult to change.

This leaves building out as the answer. Some of this has happened, particularly to the north of the city. But it now finds itself in the stranglehold of the greenbelt, which is 4.5 times larger than Bristol itself.

The experience of Bristol is replicated all across the UK. For a country that is in a close to two-decade productivity slump and desperately needs growth to lift wages and generate money to pay for public services, this is not a good thing.

So, what does this analysis mean for the government's reforms? Short-term changes, including stronger housing targets, new towns and building on the 'grey belt', are all welcome. But if we are to deliver the homes the country needs we need to do something about the fundamental cause of the problem – the planning system itself.

This means replacing the current system with a rules-based, flexible zoning system where proposed housing developments that meet all the requirements of the local plan are automatically granted approval, as has been done in New Zealand. This doesn't take local consent away from the process. It just moves it upstream, setting the rules of the planning game. Once these are set, developers will know what will and won't be allowed. And this injection of certainty into the system will make it easier for developers, both large and small, to come forward with new homes.

This is a big change. But Labour has promised big change. If it is going to deliver on the homes it has recognised we rightly need, then it needs a system that supports cities like Bristol to built both up and out. **F**

Paul Swinney is director of policy and research at Centre for Cities

Underlying condition
by Sasjkia Otto

If it is to fix the economy, Labour must promote healthy workplaces

Of all the unfortunate legacies of 14 years of Conservative rule, the health of our workforce is one of the most serious. A record 3 million working-age people are currently out of the labour force due to ill health. The new Labour government must act quickly to promote healthy workplaces.

The stakes are high. Solving poor health among workers is key to addressing the UK's low growth and public service pressures. The NHS, in particular, is feeling the pressure from both ends: healthcare professionals are dropping out, while waiting lists remain stubbornly long. Fabian Society survey research shows that, among workless over-50s, 16 per cent say they are on an NHS waiting list and that it is affecting their ability to work. More broadly, the Times Health Commission found that the economic cost of working-age ill health is £150bn per year. The cost to government from benefits, lost taxes and healthcare is £70bn. For comparison, the total NHS budget for 2023/24 was £170bn.

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This problem is the result of gaps in support for workers to stay well in work and to rehabilitate or effectively manage their symptoms if they become ill. Complicating the matter, work itself is often a cause of ill health: musculoskeletal and mental health conditions are the biggest contributors to being off sick and to sickness benefits claims, and most experiencing these conditions cite work as a contributing factor.

Working conditions are key. Workers at risk of ill-health often receive poor support. This is especially the case if employers do not view them as 'disabled' under the Equality Act and so believe them ineligible for 'reasonable adjustments' required by law. Other employers do not understand what kind of adjustments could help someone stay well at work, or they do not think the necessary adjustments are 'reasonable'. Some workers face detriment after sharing confidential medical details; many don't take the risk. Our survey found that among over-50s who have experienced health problems in the past five years, just 17 per cent say that they have asked for reasonable adjustments and that their request was granted in full.

Compounding the problem, access to occupational health services is far from widespread. The Department for Work and Pensions reports that only 45 per cent of workers in Britain currently have access to some form of occupational health service, which is significantly lower than many comparable countries. And while 92 per cent of large employers provide some kind of occupational health service, this rate drops to just 18 per cent of small employers – meaning support is missing in exactly those workplaces where older and disabled workers are more prevalent.

But issues with occupational health support in the UK go beyond poor access. Often, the problems are ones we have known about for a long time: many were identified in Dame Carol Black's 2008 review. Occupational health is detached from mainstream healthcare, making it difficult for workers to access joined-up support. It also tends to be reactive rather than proactive, and neglect those not in a formal employment situation. Quality is inconsistent, and employees find it difficult to trust support that is integrated with HR functions.

The past decade has shown that, if we continue on the current trajectory, we will see mixed results at best. We have seen little progress on workplace health while government has taken a back seat. No wonder so many are out of work sick. We need radical action on health at work. Now is the time to ask seriously whether

the UK needs a National Occupational Health Service, and what this might look like. Previous Fabian Society research has recommended free access to occupational health services for those working for small and medium-sized employers and the self-employed. The government should also take action to raise provision among large employers to 100 per cent. But looking at access isn't enough on its own. The government should also review occupational health standards, how different organisations work together to deliver them, and whether existing employment rights, responsibilities and practical support are fit for purpose.

Our economy and public services depend on getting this right. **F**

Sasjkia Otto is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society

Local potential
by Bev Craig

Labour needs to set out a coherent role for local government to achieve its ambitions of national renewal

There are few institutions as central to fixing the fundamentals as local government. Whether it's delivering the core tenets of the social contract through the likes of housing and social care, or acting as convenors of place to foster inclusive economic growth, local leaders play a central role in maintaining the architecture of prosperous and vibrant places.

Despite this, over the past decade, local authorities have had to engage with a national government prevaricating between active cost-cutting and mere indifference to the mounting scale of the challenges they face. Manchester alone has had to make £443m of savings since 2010, while the sector nationally faces a £6bn black hole over the next two years, on the basis of the previous Conservative government's plans.

Nevertheless, if we can realise the latent potential of local areas across the country, the opportunities are immense. For example, were members of the Core Cities group and their hinterlands to match the performance of their European peers, it would boost economic activity by over 20 per cent, adding £100bn per year to the UK economy in perpetuity – a huge potential economic dividend, which would also see over a million people removed from poverty and tens of millions of years gained in improved health.

Given these challenges and opportunities, and in the context of a new Labour government, the capacity of local government to deliver must be at the forefront of our minds. The mission-driven agenda underpinning the government's approach speaks not just to the need to reimagine Whitehall's ways of working: a reformed core must be accompanied by a dynamic and empowered local level.

To facilitate this, local leaders also have a responsibility to foster best practice and transformation, even in this incredibly challenging fiscal environment. In Manchester, we have acknowledged the need to get on the front foot. Investing in prevention, early years and education has seen our schools now outperforming the national average for the first time in our history, while our work to reform public services – bolstered by our Making Manchester Fairer plan – has applied renewed focus to supporting those experiencing multiple disadvantage, and our trajectory on social care is exceptionally positive. Manchester shows what can be possible if a long-term plan, devolution of power and momentum of delivery are aligned.

This demonstrated energy and ability to innovate can be found in local areas across the country – you need only skim through the Local Government Association's '101 Achievements of Labour in Power', produced ahead of the election, to see countless examples of Labour local and regional authorities leading the way on this agenda.

Despite the optimism represented by this activity, the budgets underpinning local government are creaking. Importantly, this is not solely a problem with the local government finance settlement – ie, the money that flows from central government to local authorities. It is just as much to do with the fact that local government has been asked to address the inadequacies of the centre as they have played out across the country's localities. This is a multi-faceted challenge, but it poses an opportunity in that cross-government solutions can contribute to an improvement in what local government must deal with.

And the payoff for addressing pressing local issues reaches beyond local government. Stabilising social care helps stabilise the NHS. Addressing soaring homelessness improves life chances and reduces spending. Reforming under-pressure special educational needs and disabilities support improves educational attainment.

This government was elected on a mandate to deliver growth and reform, with the understanding that one is required for the other to flourish. To bring its major national ambitions to bear in a manner no previous government has to date, a defined and coherent role for local government is required – underpinned by new robust financial arrangements and further devolution, enabling accelerated delivery that is tailored to suit local areas' different strengths and needs and the aspirations of their residents.

Local government is in the business of improving lives and strengthening communities. Having taken on the role of Labour group leader at the LGA following the general election, this year's conference season represents an exciting opportunity to explore how we can strengthen the role of local government in the delivery of this Labour government's missions. **F**

Bev Craig is leader of Manchester City Council and Labour group leader at the Local Government Association

Easy wins

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Across the board
by Richard Angell

Universal A&E screening can protect the most vulnerable and save the NHS money

When Labour was last in government, it adopted an approach that might be termed progressive universalism: it improved services for all, but prioritised services for the poorest, disadvantaged and those experiencing inequalities. Sure Start, Building Schools for the Future and city academies all started in areas of deprivation before being deployed to rebuild the public realm for all. Baby bonds gave every child a nest egg, but poorest children the most. A similar principle is now being applied in HIV prevention, in the form of comprehensive A&E testing, with great success. Starmer's Labour government should turbocharge a new rollout of opt-out screening, not just in pursuit of ending the HIV epidemic, but to scale up diagnostics more widely and drive down inequality in the broadest sense.

HIV is a cruel epidemic. Preying on the health inequalities in our society – and the homophobia and racism which has persisted from HIV's emergence to the present day – it initially disproportionately hit gay and bisexual men, people who used drugs, and then the African diaspora. Today, about 106,000 people are living with HIV in the UK, including 5,150 people who have the virus but do not know it. They urgently need a test. A further 14,000 people know they have HIV, but, often as a result of the wider social determinants of health, are not taking medication. They urgently need a way back into care. If we can find these two cohorts and get those at risk to take the HIV prevention drug PrEP, we can end this epidemic. The global aim of UNAIDS is to end onward transmission of HIV by 2030. This is also the longstanding policy of the UK government and something that Labour recommitted to in its manifesto. We are currently in pole position, as a country, to be the first country in the world to reach this target. If realised, it will be the first time any government has stopped the onward transmission of any virus without a vaccine or a cure.

Labour's manifesto pledge resolved to develop an HIV action plan to make the possible probable. Keir Starmer said it would be initiated within 100 days and published within a year. Twelve months on from the election, 4 July 2025, will also mark the anniversary of Terry Higgins being the first named person to die of an AIDS-related illness.

The modern-day fight against HIV today holds new challenges. As the number of undiagnosed people gets smaller, finding each person gets harder. We need to do more to pursue approaches that go beyond white, out gay men. In particular, while there will always be the need for community testing initiatives – my charity, Terrence Higgins Trust, runs the only year-round postal home testing kit service, with 4,000 click-and-collect sites nationally – there is an increased imperative to integrate screening into patient journeys by default.

Such strategies have a long and successful track record. In the UK, we have virtually eliminated 'vertical transmission' – the non-stigmatising way to describe mother-to-baby transfer of the virus – with an initiative started under Tony Blair in 2000: antenatal HIV testing. Every mother is screened unless they opt out. Very few do. Opt-out testing in maternity services has been a triumph that has now inspired a similar approach in other parts of the health system.

The next frontier is accident and emergency. Since April 2022, every adult attending A&E in London, Blackpool, Brighton, Manchester and Salford is automatically tested for HIV and hepatitis if they are having their blood taken. In 24 months, we have diagnosed over 1,200 people. This cohort is more likely to include women, people of Black African heritage, and older people. Those that are men who have sex with men are more likely to identify as not being 'out', 'straight', or 'on the down low' and often actively avoid LGBT health messaging. Of the 1,200 people found, at least a third had already been diagnosed but were not taking their medication. Often, the untreated virus was making them ill, hence their A&E visit.

Blanket A&E testing has two key advantages. First, it is good value for money. The scheme took £2.2m to establish but, within months, had saved the NHS £8m. The scheme currently finds a positive result for every 1,500 tests, meaning the cost of negative tests is quickly paid for by savings from diagnosing people before an ICU

admission. And this is without considering the savings generated by preventing onward transmission.

Second, it is diagnosing people who don't get tested in sexual health clinics. In its first week of rollout at Lewisham Hospital, an 85-year-old was diagnosed, much to her surprise. Recently, another London hospital identified a 68-year-old with HIV who hadn't had sex for many years. The virus was eating away at her immune system; she now takes life-saving medication that can suppress the virus so it is undetectable in her system. Women, people of Black ethnicity, heterosexual people and older people are all diagnosed with HIV in greater numbers by this approach.

And as far as health inequalities are concerned, it turns out those who experience the worst inequalities are often sitting in A&E. A&E waiting rooms tend to be disproportionately populated by the very people who are less likely to visit or have access to a sexual health service.

What's more, blanket screening is not only working for HIV. Most of the 34 funded hospitals also test for hepatitis C and B, and have discovered even higher rates of infection than for HIV; one in every 300 tests comes back positive for hepatitis B.

Other illnesses can be screened for too. At Ashton-Under-Lyne Hospital, a trial of just 4,000 'opt-out' diabetes tests was done with people waiting in A&E. They found 40 previously undiagnosed people with diabetes. That's one per every 100 tests. An expanded diabetes testing programme along these lines could be a bargain, and transformational for public health.

Wes Streeting's three shifts for the health service are analogue to digital, buildings to community, and treatment to prevention. These screening programmes are examples of prevention at its best, but unlike many other preventative measures, they take place in hospitals. As such, there is a danger that they are overlooked as Labour seeks to move more resources into community health.

The opportunities to expand further are extensive. Blood tests are now available for bowel and prostate cancer, as well as for syphilis, which is at its highest level since the second world war. There is currently good progress on a blood test for dementia and a new drug that can stop its onset for a decade, the combination of which could help mitigate our social care crisis significantly.

The fiscal advantages are particularly clear-cut. It's quicker to train someone in pathology than it is to train a nurse or doctor. Blood testing labs are situated near every hospital, so their expansion would create good jobs across the UK. Plus, the more tests you buy, the more the private sector is incentivised to innovate.

Situating comprehensive diagnostic testing in A&E, at the front door of the NHS, has been proven effective by its application in HIV. It improves outcomes for patients, prioritises the poorest and most disadvantaged, and creates savings, even in the short-to-medium term. After 14 years, it is time to dust down progressive universalism and put it front and centre of the Starmer-Streeting change agenda. **F**

Richard Angell is the chief executive of Terrence Higgins Trust

Brass tacks
by Oliver Walsh

An acute lack of resources is behind many instances of homelessness

After becoming homeless due to one missed rent payment, devoted father-of-two Leigh Midwinter was stuck in council provided temporary accommodation for three years. The accommodation was unsafe and contributed to his worsening mental and physical health. Leigh spent the little money he did have on the bus fare to see his children three hours away, but had little hope of being able to afford a rent deposit that would help him move out of homelessness. He was trapped.

Leigh's experience of homelessness is unfortunately far too common. Quarterly homelessness statistics revealed that on at the end of 2023, 112,660 households in England were in temporary accommodation provided by local authorities, including a record 145,800 children. Those living in temporary accommodation often find it extremely difficult to find employment and access healthcare. Much of it is unsuitable and unsafe. And the distress is compounded by the fact that most households in temporary accommodation will be there for years, with no clear pathway out.

Temporary accommodation is not merely an unstable situation for those without a permanent home. It is also extremely costly for local authorities, who have a statutory duty to provide it to those experiencing homelessness. Leigh became homeless due to a missed rent payment of just £700; his stay in temporary accommodation cost the local authority tens of thousands of pounds.

With an ever-increasing number of households becoming homeless, temporary accommodation costs are one of the most significant drivers of the widespread financial difficulties currently faced by local authorities. Across the UK, council-owned accommodation is full and local authorities are finding themselves forced to pay extortionate rates to house residents in hotels and B&Bs. In the south east of England, this costs between £50–£90 per person per night, adding up to £18,250–£32,850 per person per annum.

Without providing those experiencing homelessness with a real pathway out of temporary accommodation, the homelessness crisis will only get worse. Families will remain trapped, services will continue to be overwhelmed and more local authorities will be forced to declare bankruptcy.

The incoming Labour government's commitment to building 1.5m new homes and ending no-fault evictions are welcome. These measures are long overdue. Unless social housing forms the vast majority of these new homes, however, they won't get close to ending the crisis.

Stuck in unsuitable temporary accommodation that worsened his mental health issues for three years, Leigh was desperate to move into permanent accommodation. Yet like the vast majority of those in temporary accommodation, he was unable to afford either a rent deposit to

move into a private rental or the vital furnishings needed to move into unfurnished social housing – at least without falling into debt.

After three years, Leigh was eventually able to move out of homelessness after he was offered permanent housing and Greater Change, the charity I work for, funded his rent deposit so that he could move in. Greater Change, founded in 2019, supports people out of temporary accommodation by providing them with personalised budgets tailored to what each client needs to move out of homelessness for good. They can be used to pay for rent deposits as in the case of Leigh, to prevent evictions by clearing rent arrears, to fund training courses that unlock employment opportunities and in a wide range of other transformative ways. Nearly 90 per cent of those the charity supported last year were not homelessness 6-12 months on. This was at an average cost of just £1,319 – dwarfed by the resulting savings for local authorities.

As long as homeless people like Leigh lack the means to pay for the upfront costs of moving into permanent housing, hundreds of thousands of households will remain stuck in temporary accommodation, irrespective of the government's new policies. We are calling for the new government to integrate personalised budgets into an evidence-driven strategy to end homelessness across the country. The simple policy measure could be introduced by making it a statutory requirement for local authorities to provide personalised budgets and combining this with a corresponding budget, allocated centrally, to fund the programme.

Combined with Labour's ambitious housebuilding programme, personalised budgets have the potential to make significant strides towards tackling the homelessness crisis in the UK. By breaking down insurmountable financial barriers, they could give hundreds of thousands of households stuck in temporary accommodation a real pathway out of homelessness. **F**

Oliver Walsh is the growth manager at homelessness charity Greater Change

Fresh start
by Natalie Perera

Reforming Ofsted can help fix our ailing education system

Bridget Phillipson has started her role in a relatively dark period for education. The gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers is at its widest in over a decade, and regional inequalities continue to deepen.

In a constrained fiscal environment, her ability to get things back on track is limited. The government's child poverty strategy will be key, but this will take time and not an insignificant amount of money.

So, until Labour can tackle child poverty, the new education secretary will need to focus on the levers she has and deploy one of the most powerful tools in her armoury: teachers. Outside of the home environment, we know that the quality of teaching matters the most to pupil outcomes.

Yet the profession is in serious trouble. The number of teachers is not keeping pace with pupil numbers, meaning that pupil:teacher ratios are increasing. There are a record number of vacancies for secondary teachers, and headteachers are now five times more likely to leave before retirement compared to 2010/11. Retention rates also continue to fall.

Labour's commitment to recruit 6,500 new teachers is a laudable aim, but will take time to deliver. It will not be enough to meet demand, and will not, on its own, deal with high levels of turnover. So how can this new government stem the bleeding of existing teachers from the profession and incentivise new teachers to join? And how can they do this without spending any money? (A disclaimer: everything the government does will incur upfront costs, and this too will require some administrative spending.) The solution lies, partially, in reforming school accountability.

The issues with Ofsted are well documented. Our own research found that once a school receives a negative Ofsted grade, its intake tends to become more disadvantaged and teacher turnover increases. And the longer the school continues to have the less than good rating, the harder the process of school improvement becomes. If a school receives an 'inadequate' grade, that pretty much guarantees that it will be subject to changes in governance and significant upheaval for staff.

The threat of a downgraded Ofsted rating can often hang over even 'high-performing' schools. Incentives are skewed and can lead to undesirable behaviours by schools, including poor admissions practices, high rates of exclusion or off-rolling and a narrowing curriculum. Schools are judged primarily by how well their pupils perform in exams; these results headline school performance tables and are a considerable factor in Ofsted inspections. It is no surprise then that the system is increasingly unattractive to teachers who joined the profession wanting to have a positive impact on children's lives.

A new government provides an opportune moment to change this status quo. The education discourse has shifted significantly since the Gove era, and there is now widespread acknowledgement that school effectiveness is about more than just exam results; it is also about school inclusion, pupil wellbeing, the offer of a broad and balanced curriculum and a system that doesn't burn out or disillusion teachers.

Labour has already committed to reforming Ofsted judgements and to introducing a 'balanced score care' and should now prioritise implementing these measures. EPI's own blueprint has shown that a more empirical approach can be an effective way of holding school leaders to account, while also enabling them to benchmark with their peers and share best practice. Alongside reforming Ofsted, building a similar model would be relatively cheap – and significantly cheaper than constantly firefighting the teacher recruitment and retention crisis. **F**

Natalie Perera is the chief executive of the Education Policy Institute

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

Thirty years after he helped define the New Labour agenda, David Blunkett is still going strong. He talks to *Iggy Wood* about the challenges of government and Labour's next steps

The first thing I ask David Blunkett is: "What's on your mind at the moment?"

From a strictly journalistic point of view, this is a mistake, because it turns out he has quite a lot on his mind. What follows is like seven or eight Just a Minute contestants going back-to-back, made all the more impressive because Blunkett chooses as his subjects post-secondary technical education, citizenship lessons in schools, and sentencing reform.

I quickly see why he is a source of counsel for the incoming Labour government – in which role he has, compared to other New Labour graduates like Peter Mandelson, Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, kept a relatively low profile. He reportedly has a good relationship with Bridget Phillipson, the education secretary, and he tells me that he is also working with the ministry of justice team to explore ways to tackle the prisons crisis.

"I'm helping to try and sort out the criminal justice system, which isn't providing justice, and in many respects, is criminal in itself.

"I'm speaking to both Shabana Mahmood, who's the new justice secretary, and James Timpson, who is the new prison, probation, [and] parole minister, in September. I want to be as helpful from my own experience as I can be… including on one issue which I was partly responsible for, which was imprisonment for public protection, which went very badly wrong."

Imprisonment for public protection sentences, or IPPs, allowed judges to hand down indefinite sentences to people convicted of crimes which did not merit a life sentence but who were deemed to pose a danger to the public. Those imprisoned in accordance with an IPP would only be released when the Parole Board deemed it safe to do so. Even then, they would often remain 'on licence', liable to be returned to prison for indiscretions as minor as missing an appointment. Blunkett has described the policy as his biggest regret.

"The judiciary were given it as a part of the menu of sentencing options and started to use it in very large numbers for inappropriate crimes, and we're still trying to mop that up all these years later."

Born in 1947 in Sheffield, Blunkett grew up living with his mother, father, and maternal grandfather, and attended a boarding school for the blind from the age of four. His father, who worked as a gas works foreman, died in a horrific industrial accident when Blunkett was 12. Because he had worked past retirement, the gas board refused to pay compensation, leaving the family in poverty.

Blunkett's early life has been extensively covered elsewhere, not least by Blunkett himself, and I am reluctant to make him go over old ground. But I do want to explore the differences between, and influence of, his grandfather, father and mother. How did these three totemic figures of his early life shape him?

"Well, my grandfather, in part, got me interested in history. He had a history to talk about himself, in terms of moving around the country between the first and second world wars, seeking to get a job… literally on his bike, as Norman Tebbit used to put it – and the enormous challenge of high unemployment and near poverty.

"That made a difference in terms of my perspective on learning from history both good and bad, and realising that it was only because of people's struggle in the past that we were able to stand on their shoulders and take things further.

"The second [figure] was my dad, who, as you know, died in a works accident. He had the work ethic coming out of his fingertips, and he never pandered to the fact that I couldn't see.

"He'd want me to do things with him and presumed that I would learn a way of being able to cope with it. And that was a strength, because he was there just saying 'the world doesn't owe you a living, you're going to have to get on with it'. And that taught me both self-reliance and resilience."

His father's approach to his blindness seems to have been adopted, at least in part, by Blunkett himself. In fact, I get the impression that he prefers to talk about things other than his disability. Is this fair?

"I've never emphasised or highlighted not being able to see or its challenges.

"The main [issue] was devoting sufficient time to the written agenda, to reports and policy papers and being literally on top of the job. I mean, [David] Cameron paid me a great tribute in 2015 when I stood down by saying I was never not on top of the job; but it was at a price.

"I almost overdid it. I [was] almost, not consciously, but covertly thinking 'I've got to be able to demonstrate that at no time am I not on top of the statistics, I'm not on top of the policy agenda, I'm not on top of the facts, because I can't see.' I probably overdid it, because people are sometimes not on top of the facts."

As far as Blunkett is concerned, there were some advantages to not being able to see, too.

"In a perverse sort of way, it made me more honest. I'd sit in cabinet, and I'd be saying things which, if I could have seen the faces around me, probably [would] have made me pull back. I sometimes got the snorts and the coughs… but on the whole, I said what I wanted to say."

And what about the influence of his mother?

"My mum taught me two things. Firstly, the strength of family and of kinship and of what it means to have that as a base in order to work outwards into community and national endeavour. But she also taught me, by dint of the fact that she was a pessimist, to be an optimist. [She was] always more worried about whether I was going to fall flat on my face… and just by dint of my personality and pigheadedness, that kind of drove me into saying, 'No, I'm going to do it. I am not going to be infected with the pessimism that it's not possible. I'm going to have a go at this.'"

Blunkett says that his mother's pessimism made him an optimist. But he was far from optimistic about Labour's chances before the election.

"I was. I thought it was much more like 1964 [in which Harold Wilson won a slim four-seat majority] than 1997, and I was wrong. I was wrong on two counts. One, I didn't see Farage reemerging and the vote that Reform would take, which obviously made a big difference, and I didn't see the absolutely overwhelming desire, whether people wanted Labour or not, to get rid of the Tories.

"However, the percentage swing to us, had other things been different, would have [yielded] that 1964 majority.

"Had you said to me at the beginning of the year… Labour will win on a 34 per cent vote share with a 10 per cent average swing, [I'd] have said 'forget it'."

The underlying voting patterns Blunkett highlights reflect Labour's super-efficient vote distribution. Has it left them in a dangerous position going into the next election?

"It's dangerous to be complacent about it. I think we should rejoice in the result, learn the lessons, and set about reinforcing the vote in those areas where we won, but only marginally.

"The fact that this was a spread right across the UK, including seats like Liz Truss's [which had] a 26,000 majority – I think that gives us legitimacy, but it also should give us pause for thought in terms of how we reinforce in those areas where we won because of the way in which people abstained or were prepared to give us the benefit of the doubt."

Perhaps part of the worry, I say, is that for years – perhaps going all the way back to 2008 – people have been very, very angry. Recently, this anger has been directed at the Tories; but, with Labour now in government, are they at risk of ending up on the receiving end?

"I think that's a danger that we should be aware of. I don't think that the riots [this summer] were an indication of that. The riots were an indication of basic racism and thuggery.

"However, even though we damped down expectations enormously, and we did – even more so than in '97 – people will not remember. They'll just think, in 12 months' time: you're the government, why haven't you resolved these problems? So I think we're going to have to gradually accelerate, almost like a rocket take-off."

When Tony Blair asked Blunkett which job he wanted in the last reshuffle before the 1997 election, he asked for

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the education brief. This made him one of the key faces of the New Labour project as he developed and implemented the 'education, education, education' agenda. Based on the detailed critique of the implementation of T-Level qualifications he shared with me earlier, education remains his passion. However, he is perhaps best remembered today for his time as home secretary – a very different role. I ask him whether he felt pressure to be 'hardline'.

"It wasn't easy, because you have to deal with the difficult issues that are on your agenda every day. I used to wake up and think, how many items on the seven o'clock Radio 4 news will be about the Home Office? And it was usually three or four."

One of his sparring partners during this period was Shami Chakrabarti, then head of Liberty. He recounted in an interview with The House last year how he used to approach their disagreements, telling Chakrabarti that his job was to be home secretary, and her job was leading Liberty. What did he see his job as being, in this sense?

"Well, her job was what it said on the tin – her job was to represent civil and human rights as strongly as possible.

"My job was to deal with the here and now of the reality of the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001, the consequent dangers of civil unrest – and people blaming others who were completely innocent for what had happened – the impact of inward migration, [and] at the same time wanting to balance it with sensible economic migration, and arrangements across the world for asylum seekers to be able to come to Britain, rather than having to work their way across the Channel.

"And it's very interesting, because Shami and I are both in the House of Lords; we served until earlier this year on the justice and home affairs select committee, and found ourselves agreeing to a point where it became a standing joke that we were like twins. That was because we now had a common agenda to follow. She didn't have to see a political thug around every corner, and I didn't have to see someone who was going to let off dangerous criminals or terrorists, right?"

This bifurcation of his identity, into 'home secretary' on the one hand and 'David Blunkett' on the other, strikes me as a tricky act to pull off. Perhaps risky, too. If you see your purpose, while home secretary, as akin to firefighting, does it not become difficult to challenge right-wing narratives about immigration, including Islamophobic narratives?

"You're tackling the latest crisis whilst trying desperately to retain your values and your positive, proactive agenda. So, in my case, the 11th of September attack dislocated, for a time, quite a lot of what I'd set out to do.

"You just have to live with that. I'm afraid it's the nature of the business of being in power and in central positions. If you want an easy life, go and be a vicar.

"I was proud to do it. And… if I was in the same place 25 years ago, I would do it again, having learned quite a lot, but it's not a happy place to be, and it has been called the graveyard of politicians. [And] for very good reason.

"Theresa May lasted the longest [in recent history], which was six years. But she had a very chequered period with a massive drop in police numbers, rising violent crime.

"In 2013, the [hostile environment] agenda, which civil servants were caught up in because they were ordered to [be], in terms of making threats and making people's lives a misery."

"And I think it was because Theresa, who's a decent person, actually succumbed, as so much of the Tory party did over the 14 years to 2024, to the very far right.

"I think the far right penetrated thinking and therefore policymaking, to the point where it changed the nature of the way in which they performed. Now I don't pretend that there weren't influences on me. Of course I had to take account of public opinion, and if not just the right-wing press, but if [TV news was] covering people coming across the channel in large numbers, no politician in a democracy could ignore that.

"But there were no pressures internally, as there were on the Tories. Nobody ever came to me from Downing Street and said, don't you think you're being too weak… or too namby-pamby, nobody ever said that. So it was down to my judgment as to what the balance should be between being tough and sending the necessary signals and actually understanding human rights, civil liberties and how to build a cohesive society rather than a divided one."

There is undeniably something invigorating about Blunkett. While he mentions, more than once, his own supposed arrogance, in my estimation, he is the opposite of self-centred. I get the impression that, every day for the past 60-odd years, he has woken up and started thinking about better ways to organise our society for the benefit of all.

Yet there is another side to this. His ministerial record in education is one of the most impressive in modern history, but his stint as home secretary was, as he acknowledges, more mixed. How is it that, in his own words, Shami Chakrabarti's political twin could come to be responsible for a debacle like IPPs? I am troubled, as Blunkett himself is, that such a policy was introduced on his watch.

Perhaps IPPs represent the pitfalls of separating man from minister. A degree of distance from the job – a professionalism of sorts – might well make a politician more suited to government. But clearly there is the potential to go too far – to stop thinking "what should I do?" and instead ask "what am I expected to do?" In other words, to start playing a role.

Most of the time, at least based on the accounts of his cabinet colleagues, Blunkett kept on the right side of this line. During the recent general election campaign, however, Labour frontbenchers took such 'roleplaying' to its logical conclusion, with controversial policy decisions explicitly justified in terms of how they would affect peoples' perception of the party rather than on their merits. At times, there was a sense that Labour was afraid of voters.

Can we escape this debilitating self-consciousness? Or will asylum seekers always be worried about a new round of state persecution because, whatever ministers actually believe, tomorrow's headlines are always just too important? Perhaps our best chance is to turn to those who, like Blunkett, have experienced the pressures of government, and come out the other side as determined as ever to make a difference. F

Iggy Wood is the assistant editor of the Fabian Review

In harmony

The recent riots demonstrated the need to revisit our concepts of identity and citizenship. *Tariq Modood* argues for a new multicultural nationalism

Tariq Modood is a professor of sociology, politics, and public policy at the University of Bristol and the founding director of the university's Centre for the Study of Ethnicity and Citizenship

Well before the election, Keir Starmer made it clear that he wanted to move on from 'culture wars' and have a more constructive conversation about the challenges the country faces. Yet the 'events, dear boy, events' dimension of politics intervened in his first month, which saw the worst street disturbances, violent racism and Islamophobia for a generation. Starmer's initial response in quelling the disorder and punishing the culprits was impressive – but all will agree a wider vision is necessary if we are to tackle some of the issues behind the riots. Here I think some historical context is helpful.

When it comes to post-immigration diversity and equality, there are a number of ways in which Britain, mainly under Labour governments, has taken a lead in Europe. One of these is racial equality legislation, starting in the 1960s and culminating in the Equality Act (2010) – the last act of the Gordon Brown government – which is the strongest and most extensive on our continent. Labour also took a lead in pushing back against the concept of cultural assimilation. Roy Jenkins, as Home Secretary in the 1960s, rejected the idea that the price of winning equal citizenship was to become a carbon copy of the cultural majority.

Nevertheless, the UK was for a long time too laissez-faire when it came to British national identity. Citizenship is not simply an abstract idea: each country has its own conception of itself and its citizens, largely shaped by its language(s), literature, customs, arts, sports, geography and history and including but not confined to institutions like monarchy, presidents and parliaments and struggles for democracy, equal treatment, a welfare state and so on.

It was New Labour that began to articulate a sense of progressive Britishness that all people, ethnic minorities and majorities alike, could share and identify with. This was partly in response to local tensions and a worry that communities were divided, with people from different communities leading 'parallel lives'. A growing focus on human rights and the cosmopolitanism of the era also both fed into this new sense of a progressive identity. But both Tony Blair and Gordon Brown were conscious that, between the local and the global, there needed to be a powerful, motivating sense of national identity if the country was to be successful in managing its growing diversity and in a globalised economy.

Growing up in London in the 1960s and becoming an adult in the 1970s, I sometimes felt that the idea of taking pride in one's country was missing on the centre-left. It was as if they had accepted that the National Front and the rest of the far right should be allowed to appropriate our national flag and talk up their own definition of Britishness. Too often, the centre-left failed to offer a rival and better vision of being British.

It was ethnic minority intellectuals like Lord Bhikhu Parekh, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy who insisted in the 1980s that Britishness was not an empty concept. They contended that it was intimately tied up with racism, and that as a result we could not pursue racial equality without simultaneously critically remaking Britishness. My first book, published in 1992, was entitled Not Easy Being British. It argued that minority identity assertiveness like that we had seen among Muslims was integral to achieving equality, but that it was essential that such minority identities existed within a larger, inclusive national identity that we all could belong to.

In my view, the most significant public multiculturalist document published in Britain is the Parekh report, based on the findings of the Commission on Multi-Ethnic Britain (2000). It is a very wide-ranging report, but one of its central messages is that the inequalities and exclusions associated with racism, including material inequalities and disadvantages, could not be countered by merely materialist strategies but required 'rethinking the national story', our collective identity, in a plural way. Assimilationist, majoritarian nationalism was past its usefulness and had to be replaced by a new, plural kind of national identity.

In the last few years, a new anti-racist urgency has emerged, focused on remaking our public life and re-examining our shared past – encompassing not just

recent migration, but also the legacy of slavery and Empire. Although this is essential, we must not reduce our multiethnic plurality to the black-white binary of the 1980s. This kind of binary thinking is not uncommon and can even be unconscious. For example, people often celebrate the 'diversity' of the English football team without noticing that it continues to only have white, black and white-black mixed-race players. This approach can lead us to think that colour-racism is the central challenge, despite all the evidence that the most prevalent forms of racialised hostility are Islamophobia and anti-Roma prejudice. Relatedly, it should not be the case that our equality, diversity and inclusion policies should place religious identity – as important to as many as is their colour identity – at the margins.

With this in mind, I would recommend that the Starmer Labour government explores the potential of promoting a multicultural nationalism. No state, even in a liberal democracy, is culturally neutral – all states support a certain language or languages, a religious calendar in respect of national holidays, the teaching of religion in schools and/or the funding of faith schools, certain arts, sports and leisure activities, and so on. Naturally enough, these languages, religion, arts, or sport will be those of the majority population. This is true even if no malign plan for domination is at work. Hence, it is important to distinguish when the institutional domination of the majority culture is present – and, moreover, when the majority culture has or may legitimately have normative value.

For example, the English language has a de facto dominant position in Britain that is manifested in many ways. Yet, one can also recognise that the position of English is of normative value, given the meaning that it has historically and today for the people of Britain. This normative primacy can be explained without having to bring in any domination concepts such as whiteness, or at the very least, without reducing it to questions of whiteness. For multiculturalism, however, it is a matter of extending this valued condition – of creating a society based on one's cultural identity – to include minorities.

At a minimum, the predominance that the cultural majority enjoys in shaping the national culture, symbols, and institutions should not be exercised in a way which fails to accommodate minorities. The distinctive goal of multicultural nationalism is to allow people to hold, adapt, hyphenate, fuse, and create identities important to them in the context of their being not just unique individuals but members of sociocultural, ethno-racial, and ethno-religious groups, as well as national 'co-citizens'. National co-citizens care about their country, which is not just another place on the map or a workplace opportunity – it is where they belong; it is *their* country.

The general liberal and civic nationalist approach is to say that diversity requires a 'thinning' of the national culture so that minorities may feel included and do not feel that a 'thick' majoritarian culture is imposed on them. My own preference is for an additive approach to national culture, including, say, the place of Muslims. It does not, for example, require disestablishing the national church, the Church of England, but instead should bring other faiths like Islam and Judaism into a relationship with it. Nor does it require taking religious instruction and worship out of state schools – it should be available on a voluntary basis, for those religious groups which want it, knowing that not all groups will want it, in addition to religious education as a straightforward school subject, thus ensuring that commonality and diversity are both accommodated. These are two brief examples of not a thinning of the presence of religion in the constitution or state ceremonies or of religion in state schools, but of a pluralistic thickening, an addition to and remaking of the national public culture.

Multiculturalism is built on national citizenship and national identity. This must be an inclusive national identity

Multiculturalism, then, is built on national citizenship and national identity. This must be an inclusive national identity, which recognises minority identities and offers both institutional accommodation to minority ethno-religious needs and remakes the public space and the symbols of national identity so that all can have a sense of belonging. Such multicultural nationalism unites the concerns of some of those currently sympathetic to majoritarian nationalism and those who are pro-diversity and minority accommodationist. A brilliant recent example was the coronation of King Charles, which combined weird and wonderful ancient rituals, an Anglican church service which for the first time included women bishops and black Christians, including a gospel choir, but also involved both Lords and religious leaders from the key minority faiths. Besides the traditional oath to maintain the Church of England as an established Church, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked the King to "seek to foster an environment in which people of all faiths and beliefs may live freely".

The racist and Islamophobic violence that broke out in August has immediate causes but also requires us to address the underlying issues and present a vision for a hopeful future. Multicultural nationalism may represent the political approach most likely to offer a feasible alternative rallying point to monocultural nationalism – which is the form that diversity scepticism will continue to take unless we can offer an alternative vision of Britishness to some of those currently inclined towards diversity-scepticism. F

Driving success

The UK's brightest industries deserve more than just accidental support, writes *Diane Coyle*

Professor Diane Coyle is the Bennett Professor of Public Policy at the University of Cambridge and co-director of the Bennett Institute, where she heads research under the themes of progress and productivity.

After some five decades out of fashion, at least in terms of political rhetoric, industrial policy is high on the agenda in a number of countries. The number of industrial policy interventions and the scale of the public expenditure involved is on the increase globally, and particularly in OECD economies.

There are several reasons for the re-emergence of a philosophy that had seemingly been conclusively replaced by a transatlantic shift towards laissez-faire under Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Supply side shocks since the 2008-9 financial crisis, including the 2020-21 pandemic and 2022 Russian invasion, revealed various supply chain bottlenecks in globalised production networks. Recent geopolitical tensions have underlined concerns about economic resilience. Moreover, the global economy is in the midst of two structural technological transformations – namely the transition to net zero and a new wave of AI and digital technologies. The market structures and patterns of comparative advantage established in the short to medium term as these two general purpose technologies advance and diffuse will shape countries' economic fortunes for decades to come. The recent rise of industrial policies therefore signals governments' recognition – to varying degrees – that establishing a strategic framework for the supply side of the economy is an urgent task.

There is a gap between rhetoric and reality. UK governments never stopped using some industrial policy tools, even as they downplayed or critiqued the idea of actively shaping production activities. On the surface, Thatcher's governments were strongly averse to the idea of government activism, and after the election of New Labour in 1997 several attempts to introduce industrial policies were short-lived and featured significant policy churn. Yet 'horizontal' policy tools – such as public spending on basic research, tax credits for research and development (R&D), export credit guarantees and infrastructure investment – have nevertheless always been part of the policy armoury. Some 'verticals', too, have long been explicitly supported, including defence R&D and production, and intervention in basic industries such as steel, often on national security or resilience grounds. And the pandemic triggered a significant set of government interventions to produce, manufacture and distribute new vaccines rapidly and at scale, in some cases involving explicit setting aside of market economic principles.

Successive UK governments have also implemented 'accidental' industrial policies in the life sciences and pharmaceuticals sector, the creative industries and financial services, each of which has been recognised as an area of UK economic strength, but without measures characterised as specific sectoral industrial policies.

In life sciences, the policies have included a clear and stable regulatory framework; consistent and significant public funding for research in UK universities, augmented by private funding from charities and foundations; and tax relief including the patent box, widely used by the sector. But the absence of a strategic view may not have generated the best returns for health outcomes in the UK.

In finance, the instruments have included episodes of deregulation (although against a background of substantial regulatory policy churn and a growing burden of regulation); encouragement for innovation in fintech; and massive infrastructure investment for the City and Docklands in London. The sector has become a substantial net exporter despite the lack of a consistent policy framework regarding the balance between regulation, innovation and competition.

In the creative sector, industrial policy has featured a combination of deregulation to encourage competition with core public funding of R&D and skills including through the BBC, and 'advance market commitments' in the form of BBC and Channel 4 commissioning of independent production, films and music. In one specific decision at the height of Thatcherism, the launch of the BBC Micro computer seeded the UK's successful video

games industry. The sector has grown to be about as significant as financial services for the UK economy, despite increasing political hostility.

What the three examples have in common is that the various policies supporting them have not formed part of a conscious strategic framework, with interventions linked to specific identified needs.

While public support for basic R&D is indeed an appropriate instrument in the case of life sciences, as noted above, questions have been raised about whether or not there is now too much funding relative to other research areas. Meanwhile the important role of the UK's regulatory environment has not been fully acknowledged; it will be important to maintain the stability of the regulatory framework and to develop a similarly clear and stable set of rules for health data use in the age of AI. In addition, other sectoral needs have not been met. For example, companies often complain of skill shortages at the mid-skill level, such as lab technicians.

In the case of financial services, the regulatory environment has by contrast been unstable; perhaps understandably so post-2008. But the framework continues to be debated, and as there are party political differences of view (as well as lobbying by the sector) it seems likely to remain contested. There are also questions about the appropriate regulatory framework for fintech innovations, and the balance between enabling innovation and protecting consumers. The debate also ignores the important role of planning policies and infrastructure provision. The question here seems to concern the societal economic return to what has in fact been substantial public subsidy to the sector (even ignoring the public finance cost of ban bailouts and the ultimate cost of the QE programme). The construct in the national accounts of 'financial intermediation services indirectly measured' imputes valued added to speculative trading by the sector. Of the three sectors discussed here, it is by far the most successful net exporter, but it would not be unreasonable to consider its 'true' ratio of GVA to GDP to be lower than the 7 per cent recorded in the national accounts.

When it comes to the creative sector, there is, in recent decades, a sense that its success has come about despite stated government support rather than because of it. Although a varied sector, including broadcast, games, software, publishing, heritage and the arts, with a share of GDP and numbers employed similar to financial services, public funding has been progressively reduced in real terms. The success of public interventions such as Channel 4 or the BBC Micro does not feature in political rhetoric; on the contrary, Conservative governments have sought to undermine the case for any government role at the same time as enabling and lauding commercial activities – even though these often have foreign providers without an embedded commitment to the UK supply chain. Nevertheless, the UK's creative sector is, like the others, an economic success story.

Given that these are successes, my argument concerns the counterfactual: how much more successful might they have been with an intentional and stable industrial policy framework, with interventions targeted to identified market failures? Each of the three case studies demonstrates flaws in the policy environment that might have been avoided if the relevant sectoral industrial policies had been introduced by design rather than by happenstance. Life sciences and pharmaceuticals would have fewer mid-level skill shortages, and a sharper focus on both the commercial and health returns from the high level of publicly-funded research. In contrast to the life sciences, the financial services sector could have had less regulatory upheaval, offering firms more clarity about the policy trade-offs between competition, innovation and stability. Governments might also have considered more carefully the location of the major infrastructure investments and planning reform to accelerate the development of secondary financial services locations in the UK. The economic significance of the creative industries and the potential for beneficial market and export growth given the longstanding existence of major industrial policy interventions might have been enhanced.

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Policy decisions affecting business decisions cannot avoid having an impact on the supply side of the economy; acts of omission are choices, just as much as positive decisions. Although the counterfactual outcomes are necessarily speculative, the revival of industrial policies argues for making the most of the ones we already have, as well as developing industrial policies for the currently prioritised sectors.

With this commitment, we will continue to nurture the forward-thinking creative leaders who will shape and drive the creative economy of the future.

This piece draws on an article by Diane Coyle and Ayantola Alayande, Doing Industrial Policy By Design, in the International Productivity Monitor 2024

Going for growth

The Labour government should learn from Bidenomics – but it cannot hope to replicate it wholesale, argues *Joe Peck*

Joe Peck is a research analyst at the Urban Institute in Washington DC. He has worked with the Roosevelt Institute and consulted members of the Biden administration on how policies can improve economic mobility for those in work. He was previously a researcher at the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta and the Yale sociology department.

On Joe Biden's election in 2021, his administration set about stimulating growth in a wide range of industries. The results have been impressive: US GDP has grown by 8.6 per cent since the start of the pandemic, far outstripping Britain's 1.8 per cent growth over the same period. Biden's changes to the American economy centred around three large supply-side interventions: the Inflation Reduction Act, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, and the CHIPS and Science Act, primarily designed to boost green industries, rebuild infrastructure, and subsidise semiconductor manufacturing, respectively.

Following Rachel Reeves's well-publicised visit to Washington in May 2023, 'Bidenomics' emerged as a key aspect of Labour's economic thinking. And, even with Biden now out of the presidential race, his legacy in the UK is likely to endure. In her first speech to Treasury staff, the chancellor declared that the department "will play its full part in a new era of industrial strategy," which looks set to have Labour's green prosperity plan at its core.

This focus is the right one for a government dedicated to growth: green sectors are growing at four times the rate of the economy as a whole, and similar policies have helped revitalise industries in other advanced economies. Yet while the success of the American approach in creating jobs while reducing emissions has been profound, the Labour government should not try, nor will it manage, to match the scale of intervention undertaken by this economy of continental proportions. Our industrial base is weaker than, and our strengths dissimilar to, that of our American allies, meaning Britain will struggle to crowd-in £3 of private investment for every £1 of public funding, despite the chancellor's promise.

However, this is not cause for inaction. Britain can learn from the American example while leaning into its own strengths. Through bolstering workforce development, making smarter investments in new technologies, and utilising the power of the state, there are avenues through which industrial investments can be maximised even from a relatively weak base. For a government dependent on economic growth, it will be necessary.

Building workforce institutions to suit our rapidly changing economy

Good industrial policy requires robust workforce development. In the United States, the Biden administration has found it easier to dole out money to projects than find workers ready to take on new roles. And rapid increases in battery, solar panel, and electric vehicle manufacture, for example, have created tight labour markets in these sectors.

The Labour manifesto promised improvements to lifelong learning and the creation of specialist technical colleges that should help mend these gaps, but the task facing the new government remains daunting. The mismatch between the demand for and supply of skills is large, and varies greatly across different parts of the country. It is unlikely that greater devolution alone, while helpful, will solve this problem.

Skills England, launched in July, could give the Labour government the tools it needs to identify and mend skills gaps. There is a need for a body to take on some of the workforce coordination efforts that has proved crucial to new private investment in the US. Many of the places that have attracted private investment under Biden benefit from the presence of workforce development institutions, from the state-run training centre in Blythewood, South Carolina to the university system in New Iberia, Louisiana. Overall, metropolitan areas in receipt of Inflation Reduction Act investments have a third more workforce development institutions than those without.

Skills England could also improve the United Kingdom's relatively poor data on the supply and demand of skills in the economy. The Department for Education's Unit for Future Skills has started developing a taxonomy that might shed some light in this area, but it must ensure that its work improves data on local labour markets – where skills gaps most profoundly manifest – and categorises competencies beyond formal educational categories. Both have proven useful to the Biden Administration in its analyses of workforce needs.

Finally, credentialing must keep apace with industrial change. The US Department of Energy's new training guidelines for battery manufacturing jobs have standardised requirements in the industry and allowed relevant apprenticeship programs to train workers accordingly.

Investing in Britain's relative strengths

The United Kingdom is not the United States. The most expensive bill in Biden's trifecta of industrial legislation, the Inflation Reduction Act, implies, by some estimates, $1.2tn of government spending over the next decade, with an anticipated further $3tn in private investment. Labour's Green Prosperity Plan, by contrast, amounts to just £23.5bn over the course of a five-year parliament. Though a somewhat crude comparison, this represents about 4 per cent, annually, of its American inspiration. As the Germans have found when trying to implement their semiconductor subsidy program, it is hard for smaller, less-dynamic economies to prevent foreign capital seeking more generous incentives across the pond. Throwing more money at such a problem is not a sensible response.

Without the benefit of size, Labour must be smarter about strategy. Labour's National Wealth Fund is set to invest £7.3bn throughout this parliament in clean steel, ports, gigafactories, and carbon capture and green hydrogen technologies, creating an estimated 650,000 jobs in the process. If the government wants to maximise economic growth, they should also concentrate investments in other energy sectors like tidal and offshore wind power. Research from the Economy 2030 Inquiry shows not only that Britain has a comparative advantage in these sectors, but that they produce relatively higher returns on investments.

The Labour government should also not underestimate the comparative advantages offered by the services sector, which is likely our simplest route to higher growth. The UK already draws strength, for example, from its great universities. Simultaneously, spending on research and development, while lower as a share of total output in Britain than in the US, has recently been catching up to the OECD average. The government should look to protect these gains – and increase direct spending or tax credit incentives where possible – as a means to improve productivity and, in turn, growth.

Since 1997, both public and private investment as a share of GDP in Britain has been lower than that of the United States. It does not have to be this way. The UK's comparatively strong public bodies can help ensure that companies in regulated industries increase their investment. So, too, should greater stability in economic policy (a core tenet of Rachel Reeves's economic promise) give businesses the security they need in their investment decisions.

Placing state institutions at the centre of industrial transition

With change comes opportunity. Labour has signalled a desire to guide the private sector to a more equitable future. Certain features of US industrial policy show how private sector investment can remedy existing inequalities; the UK should learn from these lessons and, with its stronger and more centralised public sector, act on them.

The Inflation Reduction Act includes conditionalities designed to influence firm behaviour and create equitable outcomes for workers. In addition to the tax credits reserved for companies investing in green technology, further incentives are available for those that train a certain number of apprentices, pay a union-level wage, and hire workers in places left behind by the energy transition. With the exception of a relatively small number of grants, the majority of these investments come through tax credits, which do not impact up-front capital spend and are dispensed quickly. The process shows that privately-directed funding does not preclude public aims, so long as the government is clear about its mission and implements mechanisms to direct money accordingly.

However, incentives and conditionalities can only go so far. The recent injection of investment into American industries shows that new industrial funding can worsen workforce inequalities: those with less formal education, poor access to training opportunities, or who have a higher proportion of their work taken up with routine manual tasks are less likely to see local industrial investments. In Britain, a more agile legislative process and strong public institutions can help analyse and proactively correct for such inequalities.

Allowing policy time to bear fruit

Critics of the Biden administration's industrial strategy sometimes cite the president's lacklustre polling as evidence of its failure. This view neglects the fact that many of the projects instigated by the Inflation Reduction Act, Infrastructure Bill, or CHIPS Act have not started, let alone created the good jobs likely to be politically popular. Favourable polling for each of these bills individually shows that they are not the root cause of the president's woes.

Biden's popularity issues stemmed from the fact that around half of Americans wrongly believe that the economy is in recession and that unemployment is at a 50-year high – neither of which is true. Yet the perception that the economy is in the doldrums, along with the very real problem of high inflation, has caused a dour mood among American workers.

Crucially, large-scale investments take time to make their mark on national growth figures or people's payslips. The Labour government should therefore move as quickly as possible to implement its industrial plans – allowing itself fiscal flexibility in the short-term – while readying the public's expectations for a slow recovery. One need only remember the widespread dissatisfaction with the economic decisions of the 2010 Conservative-led government, only for the pretence of its "long-term economic plan" to win the party re-election. Labour in power can bolster economic growth, but it will not do so overnight. F

Changing times

A chaotic and controversial election has yielded to a new mood of optimism in South Africa. *Martin Plaut* reports from on the ground

Martin Plaut is the former Africa editor of BBC World Service News. He is a senior research fellow at the Institute of Commonwealth Studies

There has been a remarkable transformation in South African politics since the general election on 29 May this year. Voters denied the African National Congress (ANC) a majority for the first time in history, and, under the country's proportional representation system, it was left with no option but to seek political allies. The result has been a government of national unity, incorporating ten of the 18 parties with seats in the National Assembly.

At the heart of the new administration are the three largest parties: the ANC, which received 40.2 per cent of the vote, the Democratic Alliance (DA) with 21.8 per cent, and the Inkatha Freedom Party with 14.6 per cent.

What caused this upset? It is true that the result was consistent with longer-term trends; the ANC had gradually lost support over its 30 years in office. But three acute issues have recently eroded its vote further. First, unemployment is among the highest in the world, with 41.9 per cent of all adults either without work, or no longer seeking it. Young people under 24 face an even worse situation, with unemployment at 59.7 per cent. Second, corruption has skyrocketed. As the government's official commission found, the elite surrounding the ANC engaged in what was termed 'state capture' for much of the 2010s – siphoning off billions of Rands in the process. Jacob Zuma, who served as president from 2009 to 2018, is charged with 700 counts of corruption, but has never been brought to justice. Third, funds have been so misused and poorly spent that national infrastructure has collapsed. The Post Office has all but ceased to function. Railways and ports are in a dire state, with whole stations having been looted. Roads are in a state of disrepair. Damage from a gas explosion that tore apart a major street in central Johannesburg in July 2023 has still not been repaired. Basic services – from electricity to clean drinking water – are regularly cut off.

I spent the election on the ground in the Cape, where I come from. Few journalists bother to visit the many rural communities in the region, but the feeling in Napier, a 5,000-strong town two hours' drive East of Cape Town, was instructive. It is a thriving hub for agriculture with a pretty main street, complete with coffee shops, supermarkets and antique shops. It once voted for the ANC, but has since been taken by the DA in local elections.

A former ANC councillor, John October, recalling the days of apartheid, told me: "I grew up in the days of 'two doors'. Back then, shops, train stations and official buildings had one door for whites, and another door through which people of colour would be allowed to enter."

They were bitter times for people like October, who was classified as 'coloured', or of mixed racial ancestry. He stands in front of a wall of family photographs explaining what he had to deal with over the years. Some are of weddings and births, others sports, but many show him sitting on committees where he served after the end of official discrimination in 1994. October was a councillor for the ANC in Napier from 2006 to 2011. He was also a postman. "The ANC came to see me because they couldn't win Napier," he explains. "But I knew everyone."

October has retired from politics and now looks somewhat wistfully back. He worries about his community, who still have to cope with overcrowded houses, poor education and endemic drug use. "Times are hard, but what can you do?" he asks, with a broad smile. October would not say how he would vote, but he was clearly not impressed with the ANC government's delivery.

It was a sentiment I found across communities in Napier and in Khayelitsha – once a township for black Africans on the edge of Cape Town, but now a city in its own right, with a population of over 500,000. Many migrated to the area in search of jobs and to escape the collapse of services in the Eastern Cape, which is largely run by the ANC.

On election day itself, Khayelitsha was alive with campaigners in party colours going up and down the streets, singing and chanting to get their supporters out to vote. It was more raucous and engaged than any British election, but all the parties were welcoming and friendly. Although the voting was interrupted by technical issues

that left many waiting hours in queues, there was little sign of frustration or anger. This was a vote that truly represented the views of most people.

The new coalition

The power to allocate cabinet seats gave President Ramaphosa the upper hand in the ensuing coalition negotiations. The president, who cut his teeth as a union organiser and was a key negotiator in the transition to black majority rule in 1994, drove a hard bargain, in some cases reneging on his own earlier offers. In the event, he gave the DA just six ministries. This represents 18.75 per cent of the cabinet posts, despite the party holding 30.3 per cent of the government of national unity's 287 seats in parliament. In addition, the DA received six deputy ministerial positions.

But the alliance offered the DA its first opportunity to govern at a national level, and it seized the chance. The party traces its roots back to the Progressive Party during the apartheid era, when Helen Suzman was, for 13 long years, the only woman in parliament and the sole wholehearted opponent of racism.

In recent years the DA has repeatedly attacked the ANC's system of "cadre deployment", which puts key civil service posts and control of parastatals in the hands of its political appointees. The deployed party members frequently lack the skills necessary to fulfil their job descriptions. The DA's entry into government prompted fears that DA ministers could be held hostage by such officials, whose loyalties lie with the ANC party rather than their duties to the wider public. As the analyst Gareth van Onselen put it,: "The ANC has been in command of the national government for three decades, during which time it has pursued a policy of appointing party loyalists to positions in the state, from top to bottom. This was done surreptitiously at first but in October 1998 the liberation movement openly declared its intention of seizing control of all 'levers of power' in the state and elsewhere."

The DA and the smaller parties in the GNU were hyper-aware of the dangers of being weak partners in a coalition, propping up the ANC and so becoming tarnished in the eyes of voters because of mistakes forced on them by a government in which they have limited influence. The early indications, though, are that the parties are working together effectively despite their differences. This is vital if the chaotic mess left by the previous administrations is to be swept away.

Can the new government work?

This is a question that no-one can answer at present. However, the balance of power is now with President Ramaphosa. In the past he has had to placate senior members of the ANC, over whom he has limited control, since he only held a narrow majority in key party committees. The new coalition may result in uncomfortable compromises, but it could just work.

The really destructive politicians are now in opposition. The leader of the opposition, John Hlophe, is the parliamentary leader of MK – uMkhonto we Sizwe – the party founded by former president Zuma. Hlophe, a former judge, castigated the coalition government as an unholy alliance with those who oppressed the country's black majority. "The establishment of the government of national unity [GNU] is singularly a very cruel joke by the Ramaphosa faction of the ANC and the Democratic Alliance perpetuated against the oppressed and downtrodden masses of our people," he said.

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But Hlophe has limited credibility. He is the only South African judge to have been removed from the bench for attempting to improperly influence the Constitutional Court when it considered a case of corruption against president Zuma.

The other key opposition party is Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters. They are an openly racist party, attacking the DA's participation in parliament because some of its leadership is white. The ANC has rejected claims that it has "sold out" for making this alliance.

The mood of South Africans, and investors in South Africa, has lifted since the new government was formed. The chief executive of Business Leadership South Africa, Busi Mavuso, said that business confidence is growing since the new administration was formed. "Cabinet has already brought new energy to government. I have been encouraged by the speed with which several new ministers have embraced their roles, engaging with the staff of their departments and with the public," she declared.

It is a start, but from a very low base. It will take a long time before the country can reap the benefits of this new-found optimism. But there is no doubt that this is a watershed moment. The country has probably seen the last government run by a single party – a dramatic reversal, since from 1948 until 1994 South Africa was governed only by the National Party and since then only by the ANC. They brought in other parties, from time to time, but did not require them for majorities. The splintering of the ANC vote, together with the proportional representation system, means that coalition governments are almost certain to dominate in the future. This may produce greater stability, but it means that the promises offered in manifestos must – in future – be regarded as ambitions rather than pledges any party can be sure of implementing. It is a dramatic change for a nation used to being run by a powerful central administration. Will it be an improvement? Only time will tell. F

Back to basics

Solving the education staffing crisis will require a holistic approach, writes *Maggie Browning*

Maggie Browning is a teacher and Labour councillor in south London

A recruitment and retention crisis continues to hold back our education system. The increasingly transient nature of the profession has been an issue for over a decade, but in the aftermath of the pandemic, this trend has gone into overdrive.

There is no single answer to why teachers are so hard to recruit and so hard to keep. Pay is an issue. Workload is too. The post-pandemic era has presented fresh challenges: while other jobs on similar pay now enjoy flexible working as standard, teaching continues to be a rigid working week. Graduates today want to be well paid, work flexibly and have autonomy at work. Teaching, arguably, offers none of these.

Today, 70 per cent of schools still have lower funding than they did in 2010. This has created an environment of scarcity and stress for many schools. Funding pressures are located within a wider context where schools are supporting families dealing with a cost-of-living crisis. With child poverty through the roof and a mental health epidemic, education professionals are now taking responsibility for childrens' wider wellbeing. The Labour government's manifesto commitments on child poverty and children's mental health services, including the establishment of school breakfast clubs, are essential.

Training to be a teacher is expensive – tuition fees alone cost £9,000. As a result, grants are key to increasing recruitment. Grants are already generous for certain subjects, with trainees in chemistry, computing, maths and physics all eligible for bursaries of £28,000. Trainees in these subjects can also apply for scholarships, meaning they can often be taking home £60,000 just to train. The DfE could be more strategic in the awarding of these grants by implementing a 'minimum years of service' policy for recipients of the bursary. This could be implemented by trainees receiving half their bursary in their training year and the other half if they are still working as a teacher five years later.

The outgoing Tory government's decision to axe funding for the successful Now Teach programme in April 2024 was incredibly shortsighted. Since its creation in 2017, Now Teach has supported over 850 career changers to join the profession. The Labour government reinstating the DfE grant to Now Teach, so they can carry on this important work, would be highly welcome.

Teaching also has an image problem. The negative press around teaching pay and conditions, workload and stress levels has become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Good marketing might help in this regard, but there must be more concrete change, too. The open disdain displayed by multiple Conservative education secretaries took a serious toll. Thankfully, Bridget Phillipson has hit the ground running in resetting the relationships with the profession and the teaching unions.

Tackling pay and conditions is, of course, key. In particular, teachers need an above inflation pay rise in line with the recommendations of the School Teacher's Review Body. In terms of working conditions, in addition to understaffing, too many multi-academy trusts no longer adhere to the 'Burgundy Book' standards agreed by the five teacher unions, the Local Government Association and the National Employers' Organisation for School Teachers.

Women aged 30–39 are particularly likely to leave the profession. The reasons for this are complex, but the inflexibility of the job surely plays a role. There are early signs of change in this regard – one teacher friend in Liverpool will be on a '0.9' contract from September, meaning that he and his colleagues will have one full day off every two weeks, with no loss of pay. In my own school, colleagues are now able to consolidate their planning time to one half-day and work from home.

The new Labour government must grasp the nettle on teacher recruitment and retention, and understand there are no easy answers. Improving the running of other public services, not least the NHS, will do much to alleviate the pressures on schools. Re-establishing the role of local authorities within education as a centre of oversight and source of support for schools and teachers is important, and needs further thought. Creative thinking, such as centralising supply teachers via local authorities, could aid schools in planning for long term cover and keeping costs down. There are no easy answers to this conundrum, but tackling it is central to reinvigorating our education system and making it fit for purpose once again. **F**

A great example

Labour ministers should take inspiration from the career of Barbara Castle, suggests *Niall Devitt*

Niall Devitt is a researcher specialising in transport and Labour party history. The first part of his history of the tube, Underground Railway, is due out later this year from Pen and Sword

Picture a crowded tube platform in the autumn of 1940. It is the height of the Blitz. A young woman, with a head of striking red hair, is bending down to speak to a huddle of anxious shelterers, her soft Derbyshire accent contrasting sharply with the Cockney tones of those camping out for the night. Her name is Councillor Barbara Anne Betts, an Oxford graduate and Labour councillor since 1937 for St Pancras Metropolitan Council.

It is typical of her approach to politics to go and see first-hand the conditions in the makeshift shelters of the underground. In her own words: "Night after night, just before the sirens sounded, thousands trooped down in orderly fashion into the nearest underground station, taking their bedding with them, flasks of hot tea, snacks, radios, packs of cards and magazines. Without it, London life could not have carried on in the way it did."

Councillor Betts is now better known as that true giant of the post-war parliamentary Labour party: Barbara Castle, the MP for Blackburn, one of the finest government ministers this nation has ever seen.

From her very first frontbench role as minister for transport in the new Wilson government, Castle made an impact. It is not an exaggeration to state that she may have saved what was left of the nation's railways in the wake of the 'Beeching Axe' recommended by Dr Richard Beeching in the early 1960s. Much of the damage could not be halted – it is always difficult to reverse an avalanche in mid flow, especially when most of the civil servants, advisors and British Rail board think it a splendid idea. As in north London in 1940, however, Castle was determined to find out for herself the conditions in the field. On a railway tour in north Wales, Castle turned to British Railway manager George Dow and exclaimed: "I can't close them! Can you make it work?"

The seminal Transport Act of October 1968 offered a lifeline to the surviving branches. Very much the work of Castle, it acknowledged the existence of what was becoming known as the 'social railway' – loss-making branch lines that nevertheless provided social value, and which would require government subsidy to survive. Without Castle, there would be no trains to beautiful Looe in Cornwall; nor to faraway Mallaig on the romantic windswept coast of the West Highlands. In the latter case, Harry Potter would never have got to arrive at wizard school without Castle – the famed Hogwarts Express was filmed on this magnificent line. Today's packed trains, including a regular steam powered service from Fort William, bear testimony to Castle's wisdom and foresight. More broadly, by establishing regional passenger transport executives to help foster bus and train coordination, Castle had shown there was a real alternative to the car and that rail, buses and an extended underground network in London were worth the financial support required from central government.

Castle was the first transport minister to fully grasp the implications of the Keynes-inspired concept of 'cost benefit analysis,' which could reveal the utility of projects that on a simple profit-and-loss basis would not be normally constructed. Against the backdrop of a looming devaluation crisis, in August 1967 she explained her thinking about the Victoria line to Brixton: "It will actually cost the board money. I have decided that the benefit of the line to the public, not least in relieving the congested conditions in which many of them have to travel, will outweigh any accounting loss. So I have given the go ahead." Castle would push hard in Harold Wilson's Cabinet and in debates for the 'Fleet' – later Jubilee – line to Charing Cross. Thirty years ahead of her time, she became an advocate for a congestion charge for London which could be then used to help subsidise the underground.

In sharp contrast to London Transport's relatively enlightened policies stood the large parts of British Rail where there existed longstanding race bars, designed to prevent the recruitment of black and Asian members of staff. The situation came to a head in a landmark court

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case, the first successful prosecution under the Race Relations Act of 1965. Xavier Asquith was an experienced and exemplary employee, who, when applying for another guard position at Euston, was abruptly turned down. When he questioned the decision, he faced intimidation and even death threats. A furious Barbara Castle personally descended on Euston to force the British Rail board to end the now-illegal practice on the 15 July 1966.

Castle's tenure also saw – despite green-inked death threats from motorists – the introduction of both the breathalyser and a permanent national speed limit of 70mph. These policies alone have almost certainly saved countless lives since.

The Ministry of Transport had been a considerable challenge to sort out, a potentially poisoned chalice which she had handled with élan. Castle would need all of her considerable skill for her next mission as Secretary of State for Employment from April 1968. Wilson knew that the issue of industrial relations could make or break Labour governments. In particular, wildcat strikes, decisions taken with shows of hands rather than ballots, and openly communist leadership made trade unions, at times, the Achilles' heel of the whole Labour movement and a gift to Conservative Central Office. Given her recent performance at the Ministry of Transport and her leftwing Bevanite credentials, Wilson, in secret talks with Castle, asked the new minister to draw up a White Paper to introduce what in hindsight seem an entirely sensible and reasonable set of proposals for reform. Delivered in January 1969, Castle proposed to force unions to call a ballot before a strike was held, along with the establishment of an Industrial Board to enforce settlements in industrial disputes. Famously titled In Place of Strife, her seminal work met with howls of protest from the so-called 'brothers', led by the Home Secretary, James Callaghan, and rising Labour stars including a young Neil Kinnock. (This proved to be a great irony, as both of their later careers would come to be defined by disastrous industrial action called without genuine ballots.)The defeat of Castle's reforms laid the groundwork for the destruction of trade union power under successive Conservative administrations, leaving millions of workers vulnerable to unscrupulous employers, a situation that the new Starmer government will seek to belatedly remedy. Perhaps it would have been better for workers, and the country as a whole, if Labour had listened to Barbara in the first place?

Although Wilson was having to juggle a cabinet full of resentful Gaitskellites, many of whom would later leave to form the SDP, in hindsight, Castle had been badly let down, and Labour had just scored its greatest own goal of the post-war period. Though bruised, Castle would still secure the Equal Pay Act of 1970, enshrining equal pay, in theory at least, for working women.

With Labour unexpectedly returned to power in the two general elections of February and October 1974, Castle became Secretary of State for Health and Social Services. Another difficult portfolio even at the best of times, she managed to get through a series of radical reforms despite the party's wafer-thin majority. These included such landmarks as Mobility Allowances and Invalid Care Allowance for single women and those who care full time for disabled relatives. Further, there were significant reforms to child benefits in the seminal Child Benefit Act of 1976, which ensured the firstborn child was included in addition to subsequent offspring, while significantly payments were to be made directly to mothers, not fathers. (Castle had remembered the sage advice of that other extraordinary Labour woman, Liverpudlian Bessie Braddock, the MP for Liverpool Exchange, who had warned that all too often it was the local pub landlord, not hungry children, who benefited from family allowances if they were paid to the man in the house.) Naturally, the last measure was fiercely opposed by male-dominated trade unions. In another significant change, benefit rises were linked to individual earnings rather than prices.

Perhaps Castle's finest achievement was the monumental Sex Discrimination Act of 1975. Again hated by the unreconstructed, for the first time in British history, it enshrined the principle that women were equal in the workplace and would no longer be treated as semi-formed citizens liable to be discriminated against on grounds of sex or marital status. Though there is still a long way to go, especially with regard to pay disparities and promotion, the legislation had teeth in the form of the creation of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). However, Castle's time back in the cabinet was to prove brief, with her nemesis in a still-resentful James Callaghan summarily sacking her on assuming the top job in April 1976. Callaghan claimed he wanted someone younger, and then promptly appointed an older male minister in David Ennals MP. Not a good look, and hardly in keeping with the spirit of Castle's act of the previous year.

There is much that today's female frontbench would recognise: a different set of rules, under which a single hair out of place is immediately leapt on by the media

To survey the battering she had to endure in the press throughout her time in office is to find a torrent of blatant misogyny, along with sly comments about her 'fiery' nature, striking red hair and taste for well-cut expensive French styling. No male minister would ever have to put up with this, though few could match her ability, common sense, decency and – all-too rare among Wilson's frontbench – sobriety. There is much that today's female frontbench would no doubt recognise; a different set of rules, under which a single hair out of place or smudged lipstick is immediately leapt on by the media.

Even in Castle's retirement, a Labour grandee found time to describe this genuine giant of British politics as obsessing over her personal appearance. The comments have not worn well. The proof is in the eating, as it were, and her record transformation is still firmly in place, helping to define modern Britain in a way very few post-war politicians of either hue can claim.

What were the keys to Castle's success? First, she knew how to talk to people, from permanent secretaries to the doorman and charlady. No minister benefits when people are too uncomfortable or frightened to speak truth to power. People came to trust Castle and had her back.

Second, she understood the importance of going out and talking to the people on the ground. For example, Castle famously invited a delegation of 186 female car-seat machinists from Ford Dagenham to come and explain how she could help them in their claim for equal conditions to the men. The end result was the aforementioned Equal Pay Act of 1970. Labour's recent approach to policy formulation has similarly sought to escape the Westminster and Whitehall bubble, and find out what people actually want. It works.

Third, her attention to detail when framing legislation. The cobbled-together legislation of the last 14 years shows what happens when this is not an absolute priority. In contrast, Castle's attention to detail meant little further legislation was subsequently required to plug unforeseen gaps. The legislation establishing the concept of the social railway is a good example of this, along with paying child benefits directly to mothers.

Fourth, her ability to get to the heart of the matter. Sometimes the problem is not what it seems. Castle was right to question the assumption that all British Rail managers were hell-bent on closing loss-making lines as claimed by Treasury mandarins. Today, though the dire service and financially extractive practices of private train operating companies hit the headlines, the more intractable problem may well be an industry which is all too often inward looking, backslapping and dominated by Network Rail. No doubt the formidable Louise Haigh, who has so owned the transport brief in opposition, will know how best to prise Network Rail's dead hands off the controls of a new state-owned Great British Railways.

Castle was a precursor to today's notably powerful government frontbench female phalanx of Cooper, Dodds, Haigh, Mahmood, Nandy, Phillipson, Powell, Rayner, Reeves, Reeves, and Stevens. They are at the heart of a Labour party back in power where it belongs, escaping the dire fate of being relegated to the status of a narcissistic, shouty and above all ineffective pressure group. Castle, no doubt, would thoroughly approve of their determination to change Britain for the better – as she did. **F**

RESEARCH ROUND-UP

A broad sweep

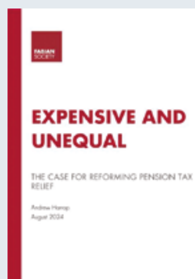
Recent Fabian Society research has covered pensions, productivity and employment status

In the brave new world that is the UK under Labour, Fabian Society research has been feeding into some of the central tenets of the government's agenda, namely raising productivity and reforming employment status. Elsewhere, Andrew Harrop's final report as general secretary suggested reforms to pension tax relief that could provide an alternative to means-testing the winter fuel allowance.

In **Going up a Gear**, published in July, the Fabian Society's deputy general secretary Luke Raikes made the case for a focus on productivity growth, and laid out what 'good' productivity grown would look like.

Without productivity growth, he argued, we will be economically vulnerable to recessions or stagnation, and we will likely see widening inequality, lower incomes, a smaller tax base, and, as a result, poorer health, lower educational attainment, and lower life satisfaction. Yet at the same time, he contended, we must avoid productivity gains that come at a high social cost: shedding jobs, reducing working conditions, or raising living costs. Poorly constructed cuts to taxes and regulation, supposedly to 'unleash growth', can in fact mean insecurity for businesses and workers, and a smaller tax base to fund public services. This can be self-defeating, ultimately undermining long-term productivity by eroding the foundations on which any modern economy rests.

Then, with government plans to eliminate the universal winter fuel allowance for pensioners in the headlines, **Expensive and Unequal** by Fabian general secretary Andrew Harrop set out a range of reforms to pension tax relief that could raise money for the Exchequer in a more progressive fashion. The underlying principle of current pension tax relief is that taxing pension contributions would tax the same earnings twice, since pensions are taxed upon payment. Yet as Harrop pointed out, almost all workers receive far more in pension tax relief than they eventually pay in tax in their pension, with high earners disproportionately benefitting from the status quo.



Employment Status, also by Luke Raikes, examined the merits and disadvantages of the UK's unusual 'limb (b) worker' status, which sits in a middle ground between employment and self-employment. Raikes explored the debate around single worker status, which would merge 'limb (b)' workers with employees in the context of the need for general improvements to employment rights and enforcement. **F**

Noticeboard

FABIAN SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
Saturday 23 November 2024, 1pm–4pm
Friends House, 173–177 Euston Road,
London NW1 2BJ

AGM business:
- Apologies
- Minutes of the 2023 AGM
- Matters arising
- In memoriam
- Chair's report
- General secretary's report
- Reports from Fabian sections
- Treasurer's report
- Approval of annual report 2023/24
- Appointment of auditors
- Jenny Jeger prize for writing
- Date of next AGM
- Any other business

More details will be available on the Fabian Society website: www.fabians.org.uk

Listings

BIRMINGHAM AND WEST MIDLANDS
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, Ship Street, Brighton BN1 1AF
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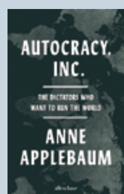
THE FABIAN QUIZ

Autocracy, Inc.

Anne Applebaum



Perhaps because of the preponderance of 20th century history in our education system, many people in Britain seem to have an anachronistic – almost cartoonish – concept of authoritarianism. A 'dictator' is a shouty man with a funny moustache, closer resembling Adenoid Hynkel, Charlie Chaplin's 1940 send-up of Adolf Hitler, than the Nazi leader himself. Even contemporary tyrants, like Kim Jong Un, are approached mainly as figures of fun.

This is all well and good up to a point – The Great Dictator was, of course, an antifascist blockbuster – but risks obscuring the nature of contemporary despotism. In Autocracy, Inc., the historian and journalist Anne Applebaum investigates a new type of totalitarianism that has spread across the globe.

Crucially, Applebaum argues, today's autarchs are bound not by ideology, but by a network of transactional relationships, allowing them to coordinate their next moves and pool resources: mi bot farm es su bot farm, for a price.

This new global 'trade' network requires democracies to take a different approach, Applebaum argues. Doing so – and becoming clearer-eyed about the threats we face – may be an existential question.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
A secret 1976 Foreign Office memo considered the merits of staging a coup in which European democracy in the event that Enrico Berlinguer won the election? The memo argued that "the force of the right could be counted on, with the support of the police and the army."

Please email your answer and your address to iggy.wood@fabians.org.uk

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 15 OCTOBER 2024.

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