FABIAN REVIEW

The quarterly magazine of the Fabian Society

Spring 2025 / fabians.org.uk / £4.95

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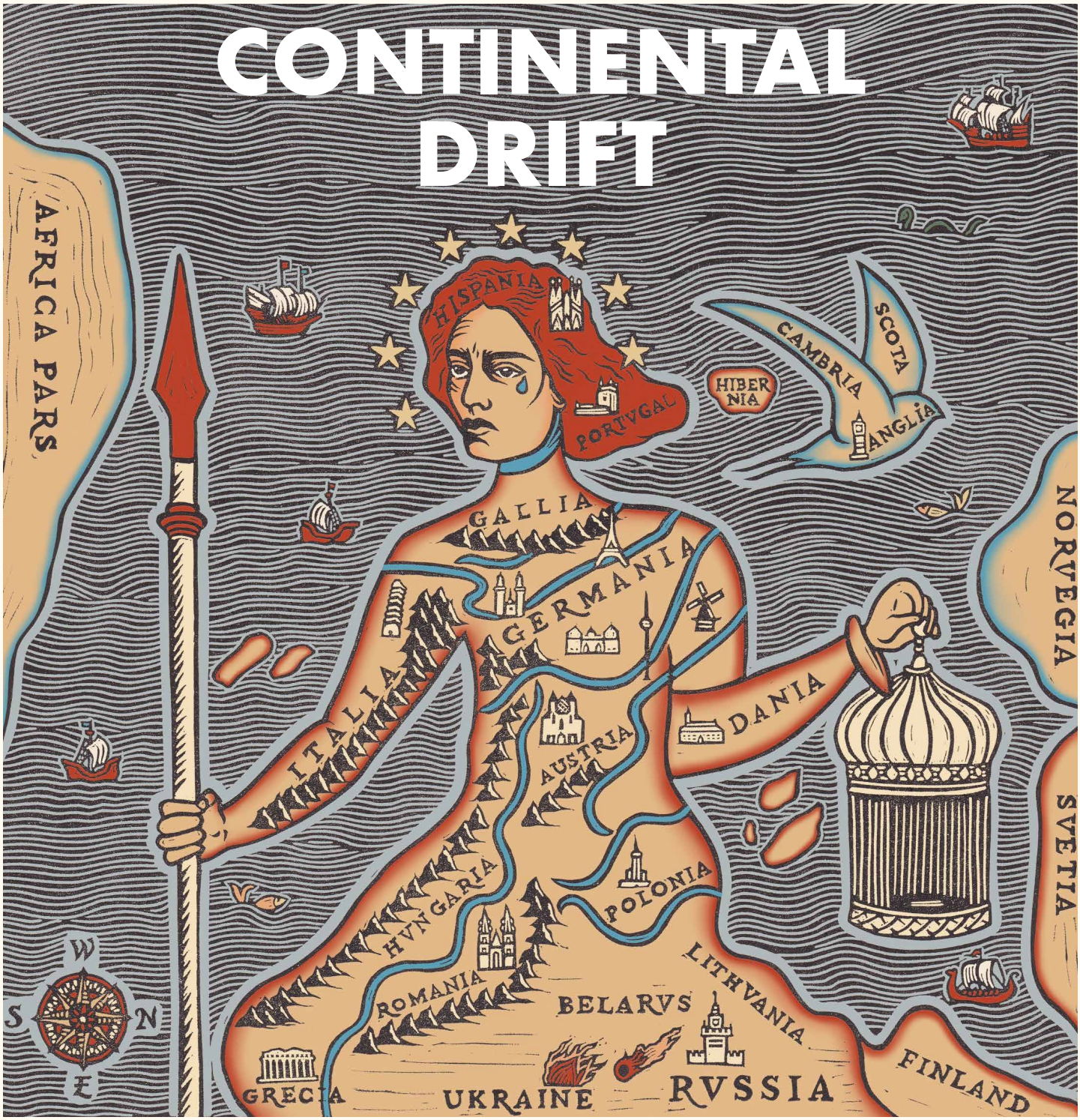

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FABIAN REVIEW

Volume 137—No.1

FABIAN SOCIETY

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.

Editor, Kate Murray
Cover illustration, Eleanor Rose
Printed by Park Communications Ltd
Design designbysoapbox.com

ISSN 1356 1812
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Uncharted territory

Labour need not choose between defence and social welfare, writes *Joe Dromey*

There are decades when nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen. These last few weeks have very much felt very much like the latter.

By an unhappy coincidence, I started my new role as general secretary at the Fabian Society on 20 January, the same day Donald Trump started his new job. In the few weeks since then, we have seen the post-war geopolitical order fragment before our very eyes. America is not only disengaging from European defence; it appears to be switching sides in the war on our continent. With collective security undermined, governments across Europe are rapidly rethinking alliances, and rushing to rebuild their armed forces. While the Trump White House appears to be seeking to end the war on Putin's terms, it is provoking a trade war which will hurt both their closest allies and their own population alike.

These transformative changes – the so-called 'Trump Shock' – pose big questions and even bigger challenges, strategic, political and economic.

Keir Starmer has been very effective at charming the new president, and he has rejected the need to choose between our alliances to the US and to Europe. However, Trump has shown himself to be an utterly unreliable ally. While he was constrained in his first term, Trump is now unleashed. The Maga takeover of the Republican party is largely complete, his 'veep' is looking likely to succeed him, and the Democrats are in disarray. There is little chance of a quick return to a president committed to European security. In this context, we must look at deepening our relationship with our European neighbours, both for our collective defence and for our future prosperity.

There is no doubt that Trump's capriciousness and Putin's aggression necessitate a major reinvestment in defence and security across Europe. This might be uncomfortable for many on the left. It should not be. Attlee and Bevin helped create NATO to guarantee European peace, democracy and self-determination after the war. Starmer is acting as the heir to this tradition by playing a leading role in securing Ukraine's future, and in coordinating collective defence of Europe. As Paul Mason and Margaret Pinder write in this edition, we should make a virtue of this strategic necessity. If we must spend more on defence, we should ensure this creates good quality jobs in every region, as a key part of our industrial strategy.

For two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall, western European nations enjoyed both robust growth and a 'peace dividend', whereby a stable international order meant we were able to shift government spending from defence to public services. With growth having stagnated over the last 15 years, and with Europe facing the necessity of increasing defence spending, Labour now faces much more difficult choices.

Many of us will have found the recent decisions on international development and welfare very difficult. Some have argued that there is a need to trim our welfare state in order to build a warfare state. While we must increase investment in our security, we should seek to avoid such narrow trade-offs. It was Labour, after all, which built the welfare state out of the rubble of the second world war, at a time when defence spending represented a significantly higher share of national income. In the context of unprecedented and unforeseen changes, a growing threat to our security, and severe pressure on our public services, there is a case for looking again at either taxation or at flexibility in our fiscal rules. This would ensure that we do not have to provide the security that we need at the expense of good society that we want to build. **F**

Shortcuts

LONG OVERDUE

A holistic approach is needed to fix the private rented sector — *Naushabah Khan MP*

For some time now, the private rented sector in Britain has been in desperate need of reform. The broken status quo we inherited from the Conservatives allows landlords to uproot families from their homes with little notice and minimal justification. This system fails to protect renters from unfair evictions while simultaneously allowing honest landlords to be undercut by those who choose to exploit housing law loopholes. Taken together with a persistent failure to build affordable new homes, under the Tories, we effectively surrendered our ability to provide homes for working people.

Before the election, we promised to deliver meaningful change to give the 11 million private renters in England the security and stability that I believe is their basic human right. We have already started to make good on this promise: the introduction of the Renters' Rights Bill marks the most significant set of legislative reforms to the private rented sector since the Housing Act of 1988. As a member of the housing, communities and local government select committee, I have seen the comprehensive scrutiny and detailed work that has gone into ensuring the robustness of these reforms.

On multiple fronts, this bill takes the necessary actions required to create a more effective and just private rented sector for both tenants and landlords. By abolishing Section 21 'no fault evictions', this government has reduced the threat of arbitrary evictions while at the same time clarifying potential grounds for repossession. Rent increases will only be permitted once per year and only to the market rate, with all increases made using a standardised process. New laws to end the practice of rental bidding, which prohibit landlords from asking or accepting a higher offer than advertised, alongside new powers for local councils to combat rental discrimination, will give tenants further protection.

The bill also pushes for drastic improvements to rented properties. Applying the Decent Homes Standard to the sector will ensure rented homes are secure and hazard free, whilst Awaab's Law sets out exact legal expectations for when landlords must act to make homes safe. Enforcement will be improved by the introduction of a new private rented sector ombudsman to deliver quick, impartial, and binding resolutions for tenants' complaints, with local authorities also gaining new investigatory powers to target and punish dodgy landlords. This bill is both desperately required and significant in its reformative scope to deliver a fairer rental market.

However, on its own, regulation will not be enough. We must also address the severe shortage of good-quality housing. Prior to becoming an MP, I worked at St Mungo's to combat homelessness and as a cabinet member for housing and property for Medway council. These experiences affirmed my belief that we must be bold in our approach to increasing housing supply. The good news is that Angela Rayner has made clear that building 1.5m new homes by 2029 is an absolute priority for this government.

The government must go further than reform of the planning system to transform our housebuilding sector, including opening up more opportunities for SME housebuilders, unlocking council house building, and facilitating the expansion of the construction workforce. Ultimately, close collaboration between national and local government – as well as housebuilders and the wider industry – is needed to determine what type of houses get built, and by whom. If we succeed, we will not only deliver vital homes but unleash economic growth to cities, towns, and communities across the UK.

In conjunction with increasing our housing supply, there are further areas for legislative review that should be considered by the government to transform the private rented sector. I have spoken in the Commons about the issue of out-of-borough placements, which fail to create new homes, artificially drive up rents, place significant pressure on local authorities and remove often vulnerable families from their relations and support networks. Reviewing and changing this ineffective system should be incorporated into the government's reforming agenda. To start, increased communication between local councils would be beneficial, as would a national database tracking placements to build a broader picture of the problem. Going forward, a review of the funding distribution model may be required to ensure that host local authorities aren't priced out of the market entirely. And again, we must support councils to build their own social housing swiftly and at scale.

The private rented sector, following 14 years of Conservative mismanagement and 16 housing ministers since 2013, is in critical need of legislative reform and a construction strategy to deliver homes across Britain. It is an unenviable task – but this pioneering Labour government is more than up to the challenge. **F**

Naushabah Khan is the Labour MP for Gillingham and Rainham

PEOPLE POWER

The Lords should be replaced with a House of Citizens — *Richard O'Brien*

On 19 January, the Sunday Times ran a highly critical editorial on the House of Lords. "The British second chamber is absurdly large," it read. It noted the much smaller size of other second chambers around the world, and argued that with reform on the horizon, peers "must not close their eyes to the trend of public opinion."

The article was not wrong. The Lords is the largest legislative chamber outside China and, other than Iran, the only one with religious leaders. But perhaps the editors

were guilty of pushing at an open door: after all, Labour's 2024 manifesto committed to making the Lords representative of the country, and the first step – a bill to remove the remaining hereditary peers – is on its way to becoming law.

Not so fast. Sunday Times readers can be forgiven for not remembering that editorial – for it dates from 19 January 1925. A full century later, the House of Lords is still bloated, anachronistic and elitist. The experience of the past 100 years is a sobering tale of reform failing time and again. And there are already signs that this is our fate once more, keeping us stuck in the company of Iran and China.

The persistent problem is deciding what a reformed second chamber should look like. Ideas regularly floated include an elected body, perhaps chosen via proportional representation, or one with members selected on a regional basis.

These approaches stall because they cannot work. British governments of all stripes have tried to create an elected second chamber. They have always failed. The Commons will never accept a rival threatening its primacy. This leaves the regional approach, exemplified by Germany. However, the UK has a unique structural barrier: England is significantly bigger than Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The solution proposed is to allocate English representation by regions – north east, south west, etc. But while people may identify as 'Mancunians', 'Londoners', or 'Geordies', no one identifies with these larger administrative regions. I've never called myself a 'northwesterner'. This reality is starkly illustrated by the largely forgotten north east regional assembly referendum in 2004. Despite strong support from politicians and public figures, the proposal was soundly defeated by a 'no' campaign arguing that the money should instead go to the NHS.

So, with voters having no appetite for more politicians, the Commons likely to see off any chance of a democratic rival, and political identity around England's nine regions a non-starter, is Lords reform doomed to fail? At the Sortition Foundation, we categorically reject this position. We see the solution hiding in plain sight: our fellow citizens.

You may have heard of citizens' assemblies, which bring together people who reflect their communities in characteristics such as gender, age, socio-economic status, disability, and ethnicity. Sortition is the method used to select participants, a service we provide for citizens' assemblies worldwide.

This is how we can break the cycle of failed Lords reform: trust the people. The concept has deeper roots in our constitution than many realise. In 1166, King Henry II introduced juries, giving ordinary people a meaningful say in legal decisions. After more than eight centuries of juries deliberating on serious matters, it is time to finish the job by replacing the House of Lords with a House of Citizens.

This second chamber would be a permanent citizens' assembly, with members selected by democratic lottery to serve a single term. It would have the powers and responsibilities of the current Lords. Genuine experts among the political donors and retired MPs in the Lords could still be consulted in their specialist areas, but no one would hold legislative power for life.

Last year, the Sortition Foundation launched the 858 Project to campaign for a House of Citizens. The campaign name was chosen because 2024 marked 858 years since Henry II's transformative move in 1166.

A House of Citizens is the only way to break the cycle of failed Lords reform. It would be genuinely representative of the UK population across every region and nation. It would have legitimacy without rivalling the Commons, and would avoid creating more politicians – which we know the public doesn't want.

Polling by YouGov for Sortition Foundation found that a House of Citizens outperforms every other proposal for Lords reform by a considerable margin. So, the question is not why we should have a House of Citizens instead of a House of Lords – it's why we shouldn't. **F**

Richard O'Brien is head of public affairs at Sortition Foundation

FOUNDATIONAL PROBLEMS

The cladding crisis has highlighted deeper issues with our approach to housing and property — *Darren Paffey MP*

"How has it come to this?" This has been what my fellow new MPs and I have frequently asked since the general election as we survey the wreckage of 14 years of failed Tory government. The list of broken promises and squandered potential is long and will already be familiar to Fabian Review readers up and down the country. But seldom has this question seemed so urgent and pressing as when applied

to the long-running cladding and fire safety scandal.

It's been nearly eight years since that terrible night in June 2017 when a fire tore through Grenfell Tower due to unsafe flammable cladding and claimed at least 72 lives. It seems scarcely believable that, after all this time, so much vital safety work hasn't even begun. How can it be that thousands still live in fear of another cladding fire?

This is a problem that I know only too well. My constituency of Southampton Itchen has one of the highest number of high-rise buildings with unsafe cladding in Hampshire. Shockingly, remediation work has started at barely a third of these properties. My casework inbox and surgeries are full of heartbreaking stories from residents, including from leaseholders who cannot sell because banks will not offer mortgages on their properties. Those in this unenviable position tell me they feel like prisoners, trapped in homes where they do not feel safe. When, shortly after the election, I organised a meeting for constituents who had been affected by cladding, our large meeting room was completely filled by more than 60 constituents, each with their own story of stress and uncertainty stretching back months and years. Enough is enough. My constituents – and others across the country – have lived with this nightmare for too long.

Finally, there is some light at the end of this very long tunnel. The government's strengthened Remediation Acceleration Plan should help to overcome the most serious barriers that have slowed down the process to a snail's pace. More stringent target dates for making buildings safe and tougher penalties for developers and landlords who do not meet their obligations are long overdue. But this is far from the end of the story.

When I met with the housing minster Alex Norris last year, I suggested several policy priorities that have emerged from, and been shaped by, the many conversations I've had with those affected. Some of these focused specifically on cladding and fire safety – for example, further work to support leaseholders living in developments below the 11-metre threshold required to secure funding from the Cladding Safety Scheme. But others spoke to the increasingly common opinion among my constituents that our archaic and centuries-old leasehold system is no longer fit for purpose. With so many leaseholders suffering delays to remediation and other fire safety works due to unfair and unreasonable practices from managing agents and landlords, it is little wonder that so many of my constituents felt it was high time for more radical change. So I am pleased that the government has now pledged to end the leasehold system – and it may be this which turns out to be the key to making our housing stock safe.

What about the homes of the future? The Labour government has rightly pledged to get Britain building again and finally deliver the new homes that are so desperately needed. But surely one of the lessons from this long-running crisis is that speed and cost-cutting cannot be at the expense of safety. This is why my constituents have supported my call for measures to ensure the long-term quality and standards of future housing developments.

Let's not fool ourselves into thinking that promising change is enough. Too many long-suffering constituents – especially leaseholders, who bought their homes in good faith – tell me that they've heard these promises before. While this scepticism is understandable, the onus is now on all of us across Westminster and beyond to show that actions speak louder than words. Developers and managing agents must get their act together, and it must be a matter of principle that leaseholders are not left out of pocket. For those of us who are privileged enough to be in parliament or otherwise in a position of influence, there is no excuse not to deliver this time. Let's get to work. F

Dr Darren Paffey is the Labour MP for Southampton Itchen

SELF HELP

Coaching is the key to unlocking potential in our prisons — *Vicki Cardwell*

Just a glance at the statistics will tell you why prisons are high on the priority list for the government. Overcrowding, understaffing and struggling regimes – the headlines make for grim reading. But the appointment of James Timpson as prisons minister has been met with a sigh of relief from experts. With a minister who has a deep understanding of what it takes to set people up for success on release, now is the time to rethink the way we 'do' rehabilitation.

This is particularly true for young people. In 2024, there were almost 14,000 young people in prison – and this looks set to increase by 50 per cent by 2026. Young adult wellbeing in prison is significantly poorer than for older people in prison – with worse experiences of mental health, higher rates of self-harm and lower engagement in education or employment, young people are consequently more likely to reoffend.

Oddly, tailored support for young people in prison is extremely limited, despite the many reasons to target this group. While young people in custody have distinct needs, they also possess unique strengths. As the prison and probation service argues: "late teenage years are… the time when a young adult is most likely to desist from crime. Young adulthood is a crucial opportunity for… the right interventions."

Coaching, like that provided by Spark Inside, is a particularly powerful tool for young people. Coaching is a facilitated conversation designed to allow individuals to find their own solutions to their own problems. Unlike mentoring, for example, coaching offers very little advice or guidance, on the basis that each person is the expert on their own life.

Instead of telling them what to do, coaching empowers people to make their own, more positive decisions and to start building the future they want. It is focused on their potential, and the tools gained can enable them to achieve their goals in the most difficult of circumstances. We can see this through both our impact data and direct feedback. In 2024, 98 per cent of young people we coached reported making progress in their lives. Seventy-five per cent made progress in work or education, giving them the opportunity to move away from crime into productive futures.

There is clear evidence – including the Ministry of Justice's analysis of our programme – that coaching of young people reduces reoffending. We think this is because it gives young people the skills and mindset to make the most of their talents and opportunities and escape the 'revolving door' of prison. All of which has a ripple effect beyond prison walls – taking one of our programmes as an example, every £1 invested generates at least £5.94 worth of benefits to society. As Labour seeks to achieve its five missions in an unforgiving fiscal climate, this is exactly the sort of low-cost, high impact intervention ministers should be exploring.

Prisoners are not the only ones who can benefit from a coaching-centred approach. In environments that are increasingly overcrowded and chaotic, it's more important than ever to invest in staff, who, as the 2021 prisons white paper said, hold "the greatest potential to make prison safe, secure and decent… places that help prisoners turn their lives around." They are the key to creating rehabilitative cultures that support change and progression. In 2020, during the height of Covid-19, we started coaching prison staff. Five years on, we've coached more than 100 staff, from officers to governors. An evaluation by The University of Lincoln showed our coaching enabled prison staff to build resilience, manage stress and improve their wellbeing, with participants welcoming the opportunity to speak to someone independent from the system.

We hope the Labour government brings fresh thinking about our prisons and how we approach rehabilitation. We believe now is the time to make coaching mainstream in criminal justice, and we urge the government to invest in this powerful, proven approach so that many more young people, prison staff and prison cultures can benefit from it. **F**

Vicki Cardwell is the CEO of Spark Inside

YOU-TOO ECONOMICS

Labour must spell out its 'supply-side progressivism' — *Silas Ojo*

Keir Starmer's Labour government has embraced deregulation. In a speech last month where he set out plans to reform the public sector, Starmer announced a new target for government to cut business compliance costs by a quarter. Shortly afterwards, HM Treasury announced a large-scale programme of reorienting regulation towards supporting growth. The prime minister also announced the abolition of the Payment Systems Regulator in the financial services industry.

This comes a few short months after Keir Starmer's Christmas eve letter to UK regulators, directing them to bring forward proposals for growth; subsequently, the chair of the Competition and Markets Authority was forced out. Not to forget the prime minister's fighting talk over the planning reforms he hopes will support his goal to deliver 1.5m homes by the next general election.

That the first Labour government in 15 years is presiding over a deregulatory agenda may be uncomfortable for some progressives. True, in its embrace of the supply-side, Labour is not dismantling worker protections or privatising public assets. On the contrary, the government's Employment Rights Bill, which is currently going through parliament, will strengthen and modernise worker protections, and rail privatisation is set to be unwound as Great British Rail is brought to life. Starmer's is also a state that aspires to an active industrial policy. Crucially, Starmer and Reeves maintain that their planning and regulatory reforms are designed to increase economic capacity in ways that directly benefit working people. This, at least on its face, represents a fundamental departure from previous iterations of supply-side economics.

With the benefits of these reforms unlikely to be realised before the end of the current parliament, and a very real electoral threat awaiting at the next election, Labour must flesh out this approach. It must bring into sharper relief, in prose and poetry, how these measures will deliver for working people.

The chancellor, Rachel Reeves, entered government with the ambition to "secure the highest sustained growth in the G7". Tight finances, along with her own self-imposed rules, meant she had no recourse to the tools Labour governments have traditionally relied on to jumpstart economic growth – let alone the latitude to match the ambition of Bidenomics across the Atlantic.

The UK government has instead been focused on unleashing private-sector dynamism, tackling key regulatory blockers to eke out every basis point of growth they can get. Ministers have also been trotted out to emphasise the virtue of work with an eye on the unprecedented number of working-age adults now outside of the labour market due to long-term ill health.

In all of this, and in many other areas, it is still quite difficult to identify how the benefit will flow to Labour's core constituency: working people. The transmission mechanism between the bonfire of 'red tape' and tangible improvements in living standards for ordinary Britons, with a few exceptions, remains tenuous and abstract.

Earlier this year, the Good Growth Foundation (GGF) published polling which

found that only 1 in 4 voters had a positive view of Labour's plans for the economy, while a third reported a very negative view. Their analysis exposed swing voters' feelings of distance from the benefits of growth. One voter from Wakefield and Rothwell, for example, told them: "It feels to me like it's the wealthy who are gaining the most from a successful economy at the moment, and the other people are getting squeezed out." GGF observed that the "trust that a growing economy will improve people's living standards is broken".

Starmer's Labour will need to contend with this sentiment as it goes all-in on its growth mission. It will need to carry these voters along. If not immediate extra pounds in their pay packets, they'll need clarity on how the government's supply-side push will deliver for them down the line.

Starmer could learn from his own approach on housing. Here, he has told a more vivid story, centred around helping young people secure "a base camp for life". This may be accompanied by changes in regulation to support banks offering more favourable lending terms to first-time buyers; innovation around the supply of part interest-only mortgages; and the Financial Conduct Authority's recently announced work to support access to mortgages.

Despite attempts to centre working people in the drive for economic growth, voters are yet to see themselves in the picture of a thriving economy. Instead, economic growth seems something that happens to other people. Labour must make clear how reforming regulation can help – and that working people have a stake in it. **F**

Silas Ojo is a consultant at business advisory firm Flint Global. He writes here in a personal capacity

WELLNESS FOR ALL

We must reclaim wellness from the marketplace or risk losing it to more insidious forces — *Bradley Young*

Celtic sea salt. Hot pilates. Mushroom coffee, rebounders and sleep tracking. This is what the path to 'wellness' looks like, if today's internet influencers are to be believed.

However esoteric or ridiculous some of their recommendations might be, these content creators are tapping into a core human concern, one which has been expressed differently in different times and settings. The idea that the average person should be happy and healthy was a key tenet of British and European post-war ideals, for example, according to which the 'welfare state' had a duty of care to citizens, and social wellbeing was seen as a fundamental measure of society's strength. To be and live well in this context often implied more than mere survival or a minimum degree of prosperity – it was about thriving, forging quality relationships, chasing meaningful goals, and ageing with dignity. Across the Atlantic, the Black Panthers ran free hospices, mindfulness groups, and hunger relief schemes, ensuring unserved Black communities had access to holistic welfare services. Their argument: to fight for social justice, people had to be cared for. Wellness was about solidarity, not self-indulgence.

Over time, that collective spirit has faded. Decades of a free-market consensus has forced the burden of wellness onto individuals as social services have fallen into disrepair. Stripped of its social gloss, wellness has been commodified. Offering everything from life hacks and mindfulness coaching to premium supplements, diet fads, and pricey fitness clubs, the industry promises self-improvement through consumption.

This process has transformed communities and societies into mere groups of stratified consumers, with access to the market shaped by economic privilege. Should you adopt a trendy wellness practice and possess the means to sustain it, the promise of a highly artificial "healthy self" is within reach. Miss the mark, and the blame falls squarely on your shoulders. In this wild wellness frontier, people are left to fend for themselves – in competition with, and at the expense of, others. The allure of exclusive knowledge is particularly strong. Getting in on the latest trick or trend is not so much about being healthier as it is about feeling smarter. It is a fear of falling behind that keeps people buying in.

The modern wellness industry is also built around rigid social norms, catering to those who fit a certain ideal. For women, wellness is typically presented as a serene activity, packaged in pastel aesthetics and sold as self-care. This brand of wellness encourages passivity and focusses on aesthetics: women should find fulfilment through quiet, unobtrusive practices and, and above all simply 'look well.' For men, wellness tends to skew more towards self-optimisation, with every challenge framed as something to conquer and fulfilment found in constantly pushing physical limits. This picture of wellness has an almost primal quality, emphasising strength – and sometimes aggression – above all else.

The emphasis wellness culture places on competition and traditional gender norms hints at a latent conservatism. Unfortunately for those of us on the left, the connection goes deeper: the basic logic of the wellness market skews heavily towards right-wing conspiracy. While some wellness practices – often the most common-sense ones, like exercising more or eating more vegetables – are supported by scientific research, others lean into pseudoscience. This creates fertile ground for anti-establishment thinking appealing to those in search of alternative 'truths.' Such 'conspirituality' blends self-improvement with alt-right ideologies; wellness becomes an individual act of 'waking up' to the reality that mainstream society is conditioned by covert, malevolent forces. The pandemic exposed this trend – nearly half of wellness influencers shared antivax content.

The idea of waking up to a corrupt and broken society provides a bridge between wellness and the 'manosphere', which thrives on the rejection of the social contract. Figures like the Tate brothers have deployed wellness rhetoric to great effect, exploiting the health and fitness aspirations of young men to disseminate extreme individualism, toxic masculinity, and hostility towards gender equality. Oddly, such bandits of the wild wellness frontier are not necessarily right-wing ideologues. To have an incentive to push a paranoid, us-versus-them worldview, they only need to be opportunistic grifters: provocation means engagement, and engagement means money.

Wellness, then, is a key cultural battleground that the left cannot afford to ignore. With Labour in government, welfare should be restored to its central place in our collective social fabric. Only by providing for everyone can we undermine the demand for the individualistic, ineffective and conspiratorial paradigm that the wellness industry has produced. **F**

Bradley Young is operations and events assistant at the Fabian Society

Last bastion

The Spanish government faces very different challenges to Labour – but it may still have some things to teach Keir Starmer, argues *Caroline Gray*

Dr Caroline Gray is a lecturer in politics and international relations at Aston University in Birmingham. She is the author of Territorial Politics and the Party System in Spain: Continuity and Change since the Financial Crisis, published by Routledge

Following the German Social Democratic party's unprecedented third-place finish in February's federal election, the Spanish Socialist Workers' party (PSOE) has cemented its position as the leading centre-left party in mainland Europe.

After calling a snap general election in July 2023 following a battering by the right in the regional and local elections, prime minister Pedro Sánchez defied the odds to remain in power, renewing his broad left coalition government. This achievement was all the more remarkable for a man who was forced to resign as party leader back in 2016, when the PSOE was at a particularly low ebb and internally divided, before he won back the role the following year.

The natural question is: what has Sánchez got right? A better approach, however, might be to ask what is different about Spain. Euroscepticism is comparatively weak in Spain, for example, as is anti-immigration sentiment, for all the far-right Vox's attempts to stoke it. Moving further right to compete with Vox has meant the conservative People's party (PP), which once spanned the centre to the far right, has lost some of its more moderate voters. The liberal Citizens party, which emerged to become the strongest challenger to the mainstream parties by the April 2019 election, disappeared almost entirely after prioritising the right-wing competition with the PP and Vox over who could clamp down most on Catalan secessionism, ruling out collaboration with the PSOE.

Sánchez has also been quite fortunate that Vox's voters do not generally match the profile of the radical right's supporters elsewhere in Europe. Studies have shown that, for now at least, it is largely younger men from the higher end of the income distribution moving to Vox, rather than the disenchanted working classes. Another key consideration is that there is no German-style 'firewall' against Vox. However reluctantly, the PP has allied with the party to govern at the regional and local levels and would do so at the national level to gain power. As a result, fear of the far right entering government made sure PSOE supporters went to vote in 2023. In this sense, Sánchez's strategic calling of a snap election paid off.

Beyond that, however, there is the question of parliamentary arithmetic. Right-wing parties hold more seats than the left in the Spanish parliament. The only reason Sánchez is still in power is that those regional nationalist parties with a right- or centre-right economic ideology – most notably the Catalan separatist party Junts and the Basque Nationalist party – will no longer prop up a right-wing Spanish government due to the PP and Vox's support for recentralisation.

While the performance of the PSOE at the 2023 election remained broadly stable (121 versus 120 seats out of 350 in 2019), the broader change in the composition of the parliament was significant. What was once a competition between the PSOE and the PP is now a competition between left-wing and right-wing blocs, and within those blocs for leadership of each. In 2023, the PP regained significant ground both within the right-wing bloc and overall, winning the most seats. The PSOE also strengthened its position as leader of the left but only because its coalition partner Sumar (previously Unidas Podemos), itself a coalition of far-left parties, declined further as it continued to be marred by infighting. This time around, Sánchez had to negotiate with Sumar and six different regional parties to become prime minister, and the latter had even more clout, with the right-wing Catalan party Junts becoming kingmaker with its seven seats. Not surprisingly, therefore, the greatest 'achievement' of Sánchez's legislature so far has been the passing of the highly controversial amnesty law to end legal action against Catalan nationalists for separatist activities.

That Sánchez has managed to stay in power by negotiating with such a wide range of parties is seen as a sign of fickleness by some, but much-needed pragmatism by others. The only current alternative in Spain's polarised parliament would be permanent gridlock. Indeed, on occasion, when support from Sumar or the regional parties has not been forthcoming, Sánchez has even proven willing to rely on the conservatives to keep the wheels of government turning. This happened after the debacle over Spain's landmark sexual consent law back in 2023, which was meant to toughen penalties for

sexual crimes but left a loophole allowing some convicted offenders to get their sentences reduced. Sánchez accepted parliamentary support from the PP to pass a revised law when his left-wing coalition partner, who wanted to close the loophole differently, refused to back it. However, this ability to shift alliances works both ways, and not always in Sánchez's favour. Pushing through a left-wing social and economic agenda is a challenge for a coalition reliant upon the votes of some right-wing regional nationalists. Junts and the Basque Nationalist party both thwarted Sánchez's attempt last year to make the temporary windfall tax on energy firms permanent. More importantly, he has been unable to pass a new budget for two years because of friction within the coalition government and disagreement with the regional parties.

Perhaps Sánchez's biggest claim to fame is that he presided over a remarkable economic recovery as tourism bounced back after the pandemic. With GDP growth exceeding 3 per cent in 2024, Spain far outperformed its major European neighbours. The evidence is clear that immigration has made a very positive contribution, boosting the working age population in a country with a particularly low birth rate. Sánchez has therefore remained consistent in his defence of immigration on both economic and humanitarian grounds, standing firm against far-right rhetoric. Once again, however, his convictions can be undermined by parliamentary arithmetic. His attempt to reform Spain's immigration law in July last year to redistribute migrant children across Spain's 17 regions was brought down in parliament by Junts' decision to align with the PP and Vox against it.

The key to Sánchez's longevity may be whether he manages the more difficult task of ensuring the benefits of Spain's robust economic growth filter down to ordinary people. GDP per capita is not growing as strongly as overall GDP, and the country faces an acute housing crisis. Sánchez has taken some steps to help with the cost of living, such as the introduction of legislation in 2022 to cap gas prices and lower electricity costs. Another key achievement that year was the reform of Spain's labour laws to reduce the overreliance on short-term contracts that have long blighted the lives of many Spaniards – though in this he got lucky, as it only passed by 176 to 174 votes because of a voting error by one conservative MP.

By retaining a clear differentiation between illegal and legal migration to Spain, and raising the prospect of an ugly right-wing coalition, Sánchez may have helped prevent a shift further rightwards in Spanish public opinion and kept his left flank relatively on-side

What, then, can the left beyond Spain learn from all this? It is hard to draw lessons, as the PSOE avoided the incumbency curse in large part due to the specifics of Spain's situation. These include the way minority governments function, the important role of territorial issues in shaping the left-right divide, the relatively lower levels of concern over immigration (for now at least) and the boost from Next Generation EU funding that has given the country a chance to get itself on a surer economic footing. Labour politicians might be inclined merely to look wistfully at these advantages, but Sánchez's treatment of the hard right could still prove instructive. With Reform polling level with or even ahead of the Tories and Labour, Sánchez's experience suggests that adopting the right's narrative on salient topics to compete with it may not be necessary – indeed, that doing so could be counterproductive. By retaining a clear differentiation between illegal and legal migration to Spain, and raising the prospect of an ugly right-wing coalition, Sánchez may have helped prevent a shift further rightwards in Spanish public opinion and kept his left flank relatively on-side. F

Wrong turn

Despite heavy losses in the 2025 snap election, a rightward shift on migration would be disastrous for the SPD, argues *Matthias Dilling*

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All the ingredients are there for a popular but profoundly misguided narrative. Ever since Denmark's Social Democrats won the 2019 Danish election on a restrictive anti-migration platform against a collapsing far-right vote, political commentators have been quick to propose a similar strategy whenever a social democratic party is in trouble elsewhere in Europe.

At first glance, the outcome of Germany's 2025 snap election seems to lend weight to such advice. On 23 February 2025, Germany's Social Democratic Party (SPD) suffered its worst result since the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919. With only 16 per cent of the vote – a fall of more than 9 per cent compared to its surprise comeback in 2021 – the party fell from first to third place, behind the far-right AfD and an increasingly right-wing CDU/CSU. After a campaign dominated by debates over migration, almost 2.5 million voters who cast their ballot for the SPD in 2021 voted for the right or far right, more than double the SPD's losses to parties on the left. The losses were particularly disastrous for the Social Democrats among large parts of their traditional core base. A mere 12 per cent of blue-collar workers (down 14 per centage points) and 13 per cent of the unemployed (-10) voted SPD, whereas the AfD won 38 per cent (+17) and 34 per cent (+17) respectively.

However, it would be wrong to expect the SPD to bounce back if it followed the 'Danish model'. Doing so would oversimplify the Danish Social Democrats' strategy, ignore the specific environment they operated in, and exaggerate what we can learn from a single case for social democratic parties at large. The comparative social science evidence demonstrates that while adopting tougher stances on migration may reduce the risk for a mainstream-left party of losing anti-migration votes to the far right, such benefits are typically outweighed by losses of pro-migration voters to other left-wing parties. Overall, there is strong evidence that accommodating far-right positions is not a vote winner. Instead, adopting such a strategy – especially by mainstream-left parties – tends to legitimize far-right positions and thus fuel the very threat it aims to negate.

Calling for a rightward turn would also misread the developments that resulted in the SPD's disastrous result. If adopting more restrictive positions on migration was the way for the mainstream left to win more votes and stop the rise of the far right, the SPD-led coalition should have benefited from the toughening of border controls and deportation of Afghan nationals in the second half of 2024. The opposite was the case, however.

Calling for a 'Danish turn' for Germany's Social Democrats also ignores the longer malaise the party has been in. It had been polling below 20 per cent for a long time before a series of violent attacks brought debates over migration and internal security back to the fore of German politics. Of course, Russia's invasion of Ukraine less than three months after the SPD-led government had taken office was a crisis like few others in Germany's post-war history, and pushed the government into unknown foreign policy territory. The rising energy prices that followed intensified the economic pressure the country faced. Up against these historic challenges, the Scholz government found itself confronted with repeated criticism over its fiscal conservatism, dictated by Germany's self-imposed debt rules, and intense infighting among the coalition partners, which delayed, watered down, or prevented initiatives to tackle Germany's public investment backlog, eroding infrastructure, and faltering economy.

Opinion polling on the issues that mattered most to voters in the 2025 election reflects this more nuanced picture. While migration was a salient topic, with 18 per cent and 15 per cent of respondents naming internal security and migration as the most important issue for

their vote choice, the same share of respondents named concerns related to the economy (18 per cent for social security, 15 per cent for economic growth). Combined with Halikiopoulou and Vlandas' recent finding that for most voters, concerns over migration are economically rather than culturally motivated, these numbers point toward the importance of economic issues in understanding the SPD's defeat.

It is around economic issues that a renewal of the SPD needs to begin. The 2025 exit polls suggest that voters have lost trust in the SPD on issues traditionally seen as the party's strongest policy areas. A mere 26 per cent (-14) and 24 per cent (-12) of respondents considered social justice and pensions the SPD's 'core competencies'. Forty-six per cent of former SPD voters criticized the party for neglecting the interests of workers and employees. A mere 15 per cent (-13) of respondents named the SPD when asked which party would be able to address the most important problems in Germany. Looking to the future, the party should be particularly concerned about the age structure of its voter base. While the SPD still won more than 20 per cent of the 60 to 69-year-old vote and the over-70 votes, just 12 per cent of 18 to 34-year-olds voted for the Social Democrats.

So, what would a renewal look like? The SPD could take inspiration from a result that risks being overlooked amidst the attention given to the success of the far right – the impressive comeback of the Left party. Politically dead in late 2024, the party rose from 3 per cent in the polls to nearly 9 per cent in the election. In a crowded field and against the backdrop of intense public debate about migration, the Left focused on its core issues of social equality and fair rents. It ran a sophisticated social media campaign that helped the party mobilize young voters, and connected with voters using an app that allowed them to collect data on unfairly high rents. On migration, the party became the focal point for many pro-migration voters when a speech by co-leader Heidi Reichinnek went viral. In it, she condemned CDU leader Friedrich Merz's for breaking Germany's longstanding "firewall" by accepting AfD support in order to pass a controversial migration motion.

Does this mean that the SPD should ignore the migration issue or try to copy the Left party's pro-migration stance? Ignoring the issue is not an option – debates over migration are unlikely to go away any time soon. But the SPD would be well advised to remember that, when trying to respond to voters' grievances, credibility matters, and credibility is typically not found by trying to be somebody else.

Rather than turning to Denmark, the SPD might be better advised to learn from a social democratic party in a different neighbouring country. In her study of Wallonia's Parti Socialiste, Léonie de Jonge detailed how starting from an economically left-wing platform, and then addressing grievances over migration through an economic lens, helped the PS to prevent contributing to discourse that discussed migration primarily in cultural terms, which had served to legitimize the far right in Flanders, Wallonia's northern Belgian counterpart.

How can the SPD get there? Many mainstream parties have floundered in their efforts to move with the times and adapt their platform and organization to changing voter preferences. This has contributed to a view of mainstream parties as overly static and outdated, pushed aside by new movements and forms of political participation. However, it does not have to be that way. In my own work, I studied the drivers of successful party adaptation over the last 75 years. Parties that succeeded in moving with the times all had in common that at moments of profound societal change, they allowed for flexible approaches to connect with society and give visibility to new ideas and personnel without forgetting where their party came from. Innovation and credibility are not mutually exclusive. Both are needed to remain relevant in increasingly volatile times. F

The next war?

Future foreign policy challenges are already playing out in the Balkans, writes *Luke John Davies*

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In late September 2023, the Serbian army massed on the border with Kosovo following a shootout between Kosovan police and around 30 armed ethnic Serbs. The militants had attacked three police units in a carefully staged operation before taking refuge in a nearby monastery, leaving one officer and three gunmen dead. Ethno-nationalist politicians in both countries talked up the possibility of conflict; only pressure from Biden's White House saw the Serbian army reluctantly withdraw.

In other words, a second shooting war on European soil very nearly started – and nobody in the UK noticed. The non-EU states of the Balkan peninsula – the ex-Yugoslav republics of Serbia, Bosnia-Hercegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia, alongside Albania and Moldova to the east – are regularly ignored in the British geopolitical discourse, dismissed as far away and unimportant. Even the Balkan EU members – Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia and Slovenia –are seen as little more than tourist destinations. This is a dangerous and misguided way to view the region.

One of the lessons that the Labour government should have learnt from Russia's invasion is to pay attention to simmering trouble-spots – as we should have done with Ukraine between 2014 and 2022. Most of the main geopolitical challenges facing the United Kingdom are playing out in the Balkans, and have been for at least a decade. Russian misinformation is widespread, as is election meddling, and it is the most likely location for another Ukraine-like conflict to break out. Meanwhile, organised crime finds the Western Balkans – a region entirely surrounded by EU states, where the rule-of-law is piecemeal, multi-state coordination of law enforcement almost nonexistent, weapons leftover from the wars of the 90s commonplace and deprivation rife – the perfect staging post for their activities in western Europe, whether drug-running, people smuggling, modern slavery or corruption. The Western Balkan route for migrants and refugees is at least comparable in scale to those crossing the Mediterranean sea in boats, but far less publicly discussed. Two-thirds of the regions power still comes from burning lignite coal, and many of the power plants there are over forty years old, undermining European efforts to combat climate change.

On every one of these issues western European nations, including Britain, are failing to step up, even where straightforward self-interest suggests they should. The most pressing of those challenges is Russia's attempt to upend the global order in Europe, which is very visible in the Balkans.

Russia's influence in the region is large, and dangerous, particularly in Serbia. Russia sees Serbia as a 'sister-culture' in the same way it does Ukraine. It was in defence of Serbs that Russia intervened to begin the first world war, and this has not been forgotten in either country. Serbian media overwhelmingly portrays the Ukrainian conflict through the Kremlin's lens and Serbia refuses to participate in the global sanctions against Russia. Serbia's ethno-nationalist president, Aleksandar Vučić, leads a regime characterised by the same democratic backsliding and admiration for Putin seen in Hungary and more recently Slovakia.

The sister-culture perspective is sometimes lost in discussion of Russian views of what they term their *blizhneye zarubezhye*, usually translated as 'near-abroad'. In short, Putin's internal population control rests on the contention that a western-style liberal democracy wouldn't work in the Russian cultural world. If a culture which ordinary Russians deem to be close to theirs – Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Serbia, Belarus – could successfully transition into such a liberal democracy, it could be held up as an example to challenge Putin at home. This helps explain why the Russians intervened in Ukraine and Georgia after the Bucharest Declaration in April 2008 put them on the path to NATO membership; the Kremlin had been relatively sanguine about the Baltic states joining four years earlier. More recently, beyond a few sound and fury statements, Russia has not made too much of Sweden and Finland's accessions.

Russia also continues to support Belgrade on its stance towards Kosovo. This is partly because the west's recognition of Kosovan independence in 2008 is still held up by the Kremlin both as justification for its invasions of Georgia and Ukraine and as an example of the west's hypocrisy – which, from the perspective of the global south, is an accusation that strikes home. Stoking tensions between Serbia and Kosovo has the potential to both tie down NATO forces and attention and to expose the alliance as a paper tiger unable to keep the peace in Europe. That is attractive to the Kremlin.

Russian malignity spreads further through the region than Serbia. A probably Russian-inspired and assisted coup in Montenegro – perhaps a last-ditch attempt to prevent the country joining NATO – was foiled in 2016. The cancellation and re-running of the recent elections in Romania following Russian influence operations is a rare story from the Balkans that made it into western headlines. Russian-backed commentators are making hay in North Macedonia and Albania about the decision by France, Denmark and the Netherlands to veto their accession to EU membership in 2019. And it is Moldova – a former Soviet republic, with a frozen conflict in Transnistria involving Russian soldiers on its internationally recognised territory – that is the most likely Kremlin target after Ukraine (rather than the Baltics or Poland, which benefit from the protection of EU and NATO membership).

Meanwhile, the EU has taken its eye off the ball in Bosnia and Kosovo, reducing western military presence in both states and ignoring both the Russian-supported (though not Russian-created) rise in ethnonationalist rhetoric in Serb-majority areas and the repressive actions of both governments towards those Serbian minorities. Bosnian Croat leaders are also destabilising the country over electoral reforms. In North Macedonia, the prime minister is accused of interfering in the independence of the judiciary, threatening to incite street protests unless five senior judges resign.

But these clouds are not without silver linings. Serbia is not a Russian vassal, however close their historical ties. It has condemned the invasion of Ukraine repeatedly at the UN and in public statements. Vučić plays a careful balancing game, and has so far successfully played Russia and the EU off against each other, benefitting from both EU accession development funding and cheap Russian oil and gas. In areas other than sanctions and normalising relations with Kosovo, Serbia is making progress on the reforms needed to join the EU, unlike, say, Turkey. Many ordinary Serbs are attracted to the EU and the western model. Student-led protests against corruption, which followed the deadly collapse of a poorly built railway station canopy in Novi Sad, have been well-organised, long-lasting and effective, invoking the memory of the 2002 overthrow of Slobodan Milošević (in whose government Vučić served as minister of information).

Meanwhile, when Ukraine cut off the flow of Russian oil and gas over its territory, the Moldovan government was able to find alternatives; the separatists in Transnistria were not. This has given Dorin Recean, the pro-EU prime minister, unexpected leverage, especially after the incumbent president, Maia Sandu, won re-election against her pro-Russian challenger Alexandr Stoianoglo. Over the border, Russian election-meddling in Romania has played out visibly in public – making people there more aware of misinformation efforts and helping Romanian democracy survive. Following the 2018 resolution of its naming dispute with Greece, North Macedonia has moved much closer to the EU in recent years, as has Albania. Britain needs to play its part in encouraging these pro-Western actors.

Perhaps the key lesson for Labour in foreign affairs is that we need to act carefully yet decisively as revanchist forces attempt to undermine and rewrite the global international order, led by Russia's violent actions in Europe. Whilst Ukraine is the most obvious place this process is happening, the Balkans may well be next. Britain, and the rest of Europe, needs to wake up and pay attention. **F**

Going east from Eden

The Nordic welfare model has been under attack for decades. What's left of it shows that it works, writes *Emma Fastesson Lindgren*

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The Nordic countries are often hailed as a model of success, where good governance, strong economies, and progressive social policies come together to create a high quality of life. Countries like Sweden and Denmark offer universal healthcare, free school meals, generous parental leave, and tuition-free university education, all of which contribute to their citizens' wellbeing. Trust in public institutions is notably high, and the region is home to some of the world's most influential companies, including H&M and Carlsberg. This combination of social stability and innovation has led many to view Scandinavia as a benchmark for excellence.

However, the Nordic model has been eroded significantly over the past few decades. This article will focus on Sweden, the largest country in the region, where much of the old Nordic model remains intact. Even here, though, the dismantling of long-held norms and rights is well underway. My aim is to illustrate some of the biggest challenges connected to the dismantling of the Nordic model. My hope is that this reflection will serve as both a vindication of the model and a warning to the left across the globe.

Take education. In 1996, when I was born, Sweden's education system was one of the best and most equitable in the world. Today, however, we have the only school system that allows private companies to profit from tax-funded education. This shift toward a neoliberal model, introduced in 1994, has drastically altered the structure of education in Sweden and eroded trust in its institutions. Private, profit-driven high schools in Sweden have been known to inflate grades to attract more students. As a result, the quality and fairness of education have been compromised, and the prestigious Stockholm School of Economics has implemented its own entrance exam to better assess students' abilities beyond their high school grades.

Healthcare in Sweden has also seen the increasing encroachment of private interests. While some of these organizations are not profit-driven, many are. In some regions, market forces are allowed to dictate planning rather than responding to actual need. The focus on profit and market-driven decisions has left those who need care the most with fewer resources and inadequate services.

The opportunity for private individuals to own and profit from the welfare system has even led to criminal infiltration. Today, individuals connected to organized crime are owners of primary healthcare centres and judicial buildings. Some also own facilities that care for young offenders, using these care homes as a means to recruit vulnerable youths into deeper involvement with crime.

Across the country, public services have been scaled back and relocated further from the people who need them most. At the same time, Sweden has experienced significant migration and struggled with poor integration, leading to high unemployment in certain areas. Taken together, along with globalization and an ineffective police force, these changes have created a toxic mix, fueling major social challenges. For example, since 2010, Sweden has seen a sharp increase in gang-related shootings and bombings. In January of this year alone, there were 32 bombings and 11 shootings. In the past, gangs primarily recruited from their local areas, but today, police reports indicate that many recruits are young people online. The number of children under 15 involved in murder cases has doubled since last year. No country can claim to have a well-functioning model when 13 to 15-year-olds are choosing to shoot, bomb, and murder others.

So, what can Britain learn from Sweden's experience? The simplest explanation of Sweden's problems – that they have arisen in response to, and in proportion to, Sweden's departure from social democracy – is the correct one. One of the key lessons is to avoid allowing private, profit-driven companies to infiltrate the publicly funded system. Additionally, taxes are important. Sweden has seen a dramatic decline in its tax rate – by 16 percentage points since 1996. It is no surprise that the state has lost control of its systems when there is less funding to maintain quality services. A well functioning welfare state costs money and demands democratic control.

In the Nordic countries and in the UK, governments need to return to basic social democratic principles. Markets are good at what they do – generating profit. But the welfare state should focus on its core strength: fostering an equal society with opportunities for all. This is how you create a society based on trust and merit with a high quality of life – as the Nordic countries used to have. **F**

Right track

The UK can learn from recent developments in European industrial policy, argues *Judith Kirton-Darling*

Judith Kirton-Darling is the general secretary of industriALL Europe. She was previously a Labour MEP

A few short years ago, industrial policy was a dirty word in European politics. Yet it is now at the top of the European political agenda. As recently as August 2023, the outgoing chief economist of the EC's competition department argued that 'foundation industries' should be allowed to disappear from Europe, and that supporting their transformation was a 'waste of money' – and it was widely assumed that he was merely making explicit what others were thinking. But in her instructions to the new competition commissioner, Teresa Ribera, the newly re-elected EC president Ursula Von der Leyen asserted a new doctrine of industrial policy. In its first 100 days, the new European Commission (EC) is set to announce a major new initiative – the Clean Industrial Deal – alongside sectoral initiatives for key industries (including the automotive, steel and chemicals industries). So why the turnaround?

Over the last four years, European manufacturing and its workforce have faced unprecedented crises. While the EU has been shedding industrial jobs since the great financial crisis – around 2.5m since 2008 – the pace of redundancies has accelerated to alarming levels in recent months, with more jobs losses announced in the automotive industry and its suppliers in the six months to December 2024 than during the pandemic. This trend has a range of causes, not least the war in Ukraine and the accompanying energy crisis, which has crippled both households and our foundation industries.

The election of Donald Trump and the threat of high tariffs on European exports has only increased the urgency of developing a European industrial plan. The alternative would likely be a race to the bottom in pursuit of 'competitiveness through deregulation', with damaging social impacts. Defending the unique strengths of the European model must be part of the progressive European narrative, and offers the only hope of marrying Europe's climate objectives with economic security, quality jobs and more energy sovereignty.

A pivot towards laissez-faire policies would be particularly foolish given the industrial policy successes in individual European countries in recent years – successes that the UK's Labour government could learn from. While strict EU state aid policies have been relaxed since the pandemic, the latest developments are broader than only public subsidies and tax breaks.

The Spanish government has a long record of trying innovative approaches. After the historic coal phase-out agreements in 2018, the Institute of Ecological Transition established Just Transition Tenders, which link grid access capacity to renewable energy projects that prioritise socio-economic concerns, quality jobs and environmental benefits for affected areas. In December 2024, a new national industrial policy law was proposed to strengthen strategic autonomy and support the transition. Public funding and contracts come with strict social conditions – and 'clawback provisions' in the case of relocation of production.

Meanwhile, in 2023 the German government introduced Klimaschutzverträge, or climate protection contracts – hedging instruments designed to support German energy-intensive industries through carbon contracts for difference (CCfD). They provide companies with financial planning security with regard to energy price developments, while ensuring that state subsidies are in line with actual demand. Modelled on private-sector hedging contracts, companies receive grants towards operating and investment costs for the use of low-carbon technologies. These take account of the additional costs of carbon-avoidance. As soon as clean production can be carried out more cheaply than conventional production, the payment relationship established by the CCfD is reversed, and additional revenue made by the subsidised companies flows back to the state. State support is conditional on employment security, negotiated with worker representatives and with penalties for companies that violate the rules.

Last year, the penny started to drop in Brussels, too, as the first major industrial policy instruments were adopted as part of the EC's Green Deal industrial plan – in part in response to the US Inflation Reduction Act. This saw the new EU Critical Raw Materials Act (CRMA) and Net Zero Industry Act (NZIA) set social and environmental conditions for strategic projects.

European industrial workers, organised in industriAll Europe, have long called for an EU industrial policy that fosters both economic and social resilience, and pursues clean reindustrialisation targets. As Labour seeks to grow the economy while strengthening workers' rights, it should look to the quiet revolution in industrial policy taking place in Europe. Importantly, with similar challenges on both sides of the Channel, greater UK-EU cooperation could be a crucial part of the solution. **F**

Stepping up

The US may be returning to 'splendid isolation' – Britain must be ready, writes *Paul Mason*

Paul Mason is a journalist for the New European and the author of Postcapitalism and How to Stop Fascism. He was previously economics editor at Channel 4 News

When US defence secretary Pete Hegseth told NATO leaders that the USA was deprioritising the defence of Europe, and called on them to hike defence spending to 5 per cent of GDP, his words were clear and his logic sound. If the US believes it needs to focus on the threat from China, then it has every right to ask its European allies to take up the slack, expand their defence industries and front-up the security of a post-conflict Ukraine.

But when JD Vance lauded the leader of Germany's far-right AfD party, and when he joined Trump in humiliating and slandering President Zelensky, alarm bells rang in every European capital. Because the worst-case scenario is that the US is no longer a reliable ally – not only regarding Ukraine, but in terms of the NATO collective defence pledge on which our security depends. The shutdown of aid and intelligence to Kyiv raised the same thought in every European defence ministry: that could happen to us.

Which of these strains of Trumpism wins out is not a given, because Russia's reaction to Ukraine's peace offer, and the UK-led diplomatic effort to keep the US engaged, can still shape the outcome. But it is right that the Labour government has not hesitated to start rearmament, while at the same time beginning to build a coalition of willing states with a shared commitment to the stabilisation and security of Ukraine. We could be only months away from – as Keir Starmer has promised – British "troops on the ground" and "planes in the air" – a situation that poses our party with a historic challenge.

By opening the National Wealth Fund to defence, giving access to £28bn of potential loans, investments and guarantees, Rachel Reeves has provided substantial fiscal firepower. But the challenges ahead are great. Industrial strategy – a crucial concern of the government before Trump's election, but doubly important now – has a brutally simple objective. It seeks to move workers, capital and resources out of low-value sectors and into high-value sectors like defence, advanced manufacturing and green energy. But directing an economy that is used to laissez-faire and low productivity is no easy task: it will need strategic co-operation both from industry bodies and the unions. We will also need a new suite of directive organisations, ranging from the new Defence Industrial Joint Council to micro-institutions such as state-backed training centres and STEM clubs.

With an estimated 58,000 vacancies in the defence sector today, and probably many more once rearmament gets under way, it may mean fewer people working in coffee chains, fewer people delivering food or driving taxis; and fewer engineering graduates working in the City, and more actually working in engineering.

Our European allies are already mobilising their finances rapidly. While that creates export opportunities for British firms, it also demands much greater coordination. So it is vital that, as Keir Starmer holds the line for transatlantic collaboration, the UK fights for a place in every significant European defence partnership – be it over space, land vehicles or long-range missiles. There is a dawning realisation in Europe that, amid new great power rivalries, it must become a fourth chess player – or else risk serving as the board. The government should now back the idea of European strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty, and endeavour to play a leadership role in both endeavours, despite remaining outside the single market.

Politically, the process of mobilising support to rearm and deter has only just begun. No progressive voter wants to spend any more on weapons than is needed, and our party has a long attachment to multilateral nuclear disarmament. But disarmament is now off the agenda: we may even need to add ground or air-based missiles to the existing submarine based nuclear deterrent. The size of our military will also have to grow, as will the reserves.

Labour politicians at every level will need to lead from the front: most UK voters have no idea of the peril we are in if the US commitment to collective security has become fragile. And at the fringes – both on the far right and on the far left – we face political forces prepared to echo Putin's propaganda and laud Trump's mercurial attitude to NATO. **F**

Inner strength

The government's approach to our domestic defence industry is promising, writes *Margaret Pinder*

Margaret Pinder is the Labour candidate for mayor of Hull and East Yorkshire

Writing in The Guardian in March, Sharon Graham, the general secretary of the trade union Unite, fired a warning shot across the government's bows over the procurement of replacements for the RAF's Typhoon fighter jets. Her concern is that the MoD is considering the purchase of US-made F-35 jets, which the Royal Navy already deploys on its aircraft carriers. "Replacing British RAF Typhoons with American F-35s would make a mockery of the prime minister's promise on British jobs and British skills," she argued.

The early signs, though, are that the government appreciates the crucial role of domestic defence manufacturers. When Rachel Reeves travelled to Fife later that month, she announced a £2bn increase in direct lending capacity for the UK defence industry, realising Labour's commitment to increased defence spending while simultaneously highlighting the potential impact for British companies.

The defence industry already supports over 430,000 jobs across the UK, most of which are located outside London and the south east. The government's promise of an additional £13.4bn from 2027 could create even more. The crucial question, then, is how much of this increased spend is likely to go to British companies, including small and medium enterprises (SMEs)?

Studies suggest that investment in the UK defence sector has a strong economic multiplier effect. Oxford Economics found in 2019 that every £1 spent generates approximately £2.20 to £2.50 in broader economic activity. In the case of Sheffield Forgemasters, a heavy engineering firm which came into MoD ownership in 2021, the local benefits are already clear. With 725 people in direct employment, up from 650 in 2021 when the MoD acquisition took place, it is now bringing a previously empty site into use as a specialist facility for the manufacture of gun barrels to supply Ukraine. The effect on the broader supply chain has been significant, with local companies including Turner & Townsend, Bond Bryan, Professional Lifting Services Ltd and SP Fields amongst the many who have secured contracts.

While the need to increase production of armaments has been brought into stark relief by the conflict in Ukraine and the volatile international situation surrounding Russia and the US, high-tech warfare ('deftech') is an area where the UK already had an opportunity – and perhaps an imperative – to step up and become an international player. Businesses in this sector are often smaller scale, but hugely innovative and agile in a rapidly changing market.

Two such domestic companies are 2iC and GemaSecure Ltd. Both are SMEs, with the former offering "digital interoperability in the battlespace with proven off-the-shelf software" that connects otherwise non-compatible systems; the latter "ultra-secure, voice, video, and data technologies" designed to process large amounts of data at high speed. These companies are harnessing the UK's digital capabilities to ensure we are equipped to defend the country against high-tech threats.

Larkspur International, which offers business support across a number of sectors, is a strong advocate for such SMEs within Labour's defence industrial strategy. It argues that agile and innovative SMEs can help ensure the deftech ecosystem is dynamic enough to adapt quickly to emerging threats. It supports government prioritisation of UK-based businesses for defence contracts to ensure that SMEs can benefit from increased demand for locally produced goods and services.

Under the Conservatives, there were doubts over the depth of the government's commitment to national products over other systems, many of which are purchased from the US and require a long-term commitment to operating systems without which they cannot function. For example, in 2021 the MoD decided to equip its new fleet of Boeing AH-64E Apache attack helicopters with the U.S.-made Lockheed Martin Joint Air-to-Ground Missile (JAGM) – rather than, say, the domestically produced MBDA Brimstone missile. Even at the time, this decision attracted criticism for prioritising short-term cost savings and ease of integration over long-term strategic benefits, including jobs, sovereign capability, and operational superiority.

Labour must leave no such doubts. Keir Starmer's pledged increase will raise defence spending to 3 per cent of GDP in the next parliament, presenting an enormous opportunity to boost domestic industry and create skilled jobs across all our regions. This commitment would be justified by the unpredictable and disrupted international situation alone; but the public may feel it is doubly justified if it does indeed translate into investment in "British growth, British jobs, British skills and British innovation". **F**

ABSOLUTELY + POSITIVE

Liam Byrne is a man on a mission – or several. He talks to *Iggy Wood* about inequality, populism, and sci-fi – and convinces him that it's all going to be alright

Anyone who has spent time with politicians knows that most of them are geeks. Which should be a good thing, except that it often manifests as awkwardness rather than expertise. Liam Byrne, though, is the right sort of geeky. When I ask him about trade with the EU and US, for example, he leaps out of his seat and over to a bookcase, returning with Charles P Kindleberger's 1973 book, The World in Depression 1929-1939. He reminds me of a university lecturer, except more invested in my education.

It's no surprise that he's spending time thinking about international relations at the moment; his role as chair of the business and trade select committee puts him right on the frontlines of the brewing trade war. What will such a dramatic shift in US foreign policy mean for the world?

"Kindleberger basically argues that you can't build an effective peace without a hegemon," Byrne says. (A hegemon, in this context, means a state with a preponderance of influence and power.)

"But Robert Keohane [another scholar of international relations] says, actually… you can have harmony after the hegemon has left.

"He says you've got to look at the demand side for stability. And right now, the demand side for stability includes us, the European Union, Japan, Australia, Canada, the Gulf, India. Actually, there are a lot of people who need safeguards against anarchy and a multilateral system that checks the power of China and re-contains Russia.

"What you're seeing now is the hegemon retreat, and the United Kingdom has to lead this push for harmony [now that] the hegemon has left. And the lesson of Robert Keohane is that this is perfectly possible, and we should be optimistic and bold about it and lean into it."

After weathering one of the more heinous stitch-ups in British politics – David Laws, his successor as chief secretary to the Treasury, publicised the traditional tongue-in-cheek note Byrne left, which infamously read 'there's no money' – Byrne is now enjoying a much more positive kind of prominence. His book, The Inequality of Wealth, has been republished in paperback. And his select committee role has seen clips of him dressing down representatives of companies like Amazon, Ticketmaster and Shein rack up views on YouTube and TikTok.

It sounds, then, like Byrne believes we can have *pax americana* without americana? "Pax post-Americana," he says. So he doesn't think we can rely on the US returning to the fold in four years' time?

"Definitely not. The United States has now become a profoundly polarised society.

"There was someone at the European Commission who said this to me last year. He said: 'look, even if President Biden wins again, it'll be a truce. But not peace.' America is now such a divided country that I think it is going to be really difficult for them to lead the world in the way that they have for most of the years since the since 1944, and so we need a degree of what the Europeans call strategic autonomy."

This analysis, of course, assumes that we aren't headed in the same direction as the US. Does Byrne think we are any safer from a Musk-style coup?

"I do, because I think our institutions are stronger and older than the Americans'.

"But I do think that there is a lot of complacency about the ceiling on Reform. There [is a] widely held view that it would be really difficult for Reform to go beyond 25 per cent. I think that's wrong.

"Unless Labour really strengthens its appeal to the working class, there is a risk that bigger numbers of the working class leave us. That's why the Employment Rights Bill was so important.

"Angela Rayner, I think, is doing such a terrific job at driving and articulating that kind of argument. And Keir has actually been very effective at communicating about this, and the realities of his childhood.

"We just need a lot more of that, because what I've come to learn in politics is that people need to understand your motives more than your plans."

Not that Byrne is short of plans. His book, The Inequality of Wealth, floats a range of policies – many quite radical – to address the uneven distribution of resources that he argues is the source of many of our problems.

"I'm absolutely convinced that wealth inequality is the rocket fuel for populism, and you can see around the world voters who have had a really challenging time for the last 10 to 20 years. They're now looking at the future and feeling really pessimistic. And [a] combination of pessimism and impatience makes people feel, look, I've just got to press the reset button."

"And so unless progressive parties can really understand that we have got to help people – [that] we've got to democratise wealth creation…[then] people are going to continue to vote for radical alternatives. Now I've set out in the book lots of ways in which we can do that in a practical way. But unless we clock this reality, we will keep losing to populists."

Byrne takes it for granted that populism is something we have to defeat. But how far from populism is his own agenda? If I told you it was Zarah Sultana who'd written a book setting out the case for a wealth tax, a sovereign wealth fund, and universal basic capital – which, in its most radical form, might involve giving £10,000 to every 25-year-old – you'd probably believe me. Of course, if it was her name on the cover, it wouldn't sport glowing testimonials from Ed Balls and Matthew D'Ancona. Why? Is the difference merely aesthetic – a divergence of style rather than substance?

"It actually goes back to an old idea pioneered by Roy Jenkins all those years ago, which was the notion of the radical centre. And at the beginnings of the New Labour era… we were passionate about this notion of a radical centre. The idea that you could be realistic about money, but radical about power was an idea that we thought was right.

"But times change. And so what the radical centre means today is something different to the New Labour days. What I think you've got now is a wide sense that the top 0.1 per cent's fortunes have just soared, [and] corporate power has concentrated, and this means that the options and freedoms that ordinary people have to earn a good life are much more limited."

Which still sounds pretty populist to me. When he was going round the Rolls-Royce showroom and the Monaco yacht show, did Byrne ever experience the populist urge – a little bit of righteous anger?

"Yeah, because when you're looking at how a superyacht is made, a million person-hours of work goes into it – a million.

"And they are engineering masterpieces. So the reality is, you're slightly in awe of what you're seeing.

"But then you just think, how on earth is the ingenuity of so many people going into pleasing the proclivities of a tiny number of very rich people? Surely that is wrong. Surely something is malfunctioning in our society, where the genius of so many is basically at the service of the absurdity of affluence.

"And so, yes – when you work in a constituency like mine, where your food banks keep running out of food, and then you go and see a million person-hours being poured into creating a superyacht, you just think: how on earth have we allowed our society to go so badly wrong?"

An even starker contrast with the opulence Byrne saw during his excursion into the lives of the super-wealthy was his experience working with homeless people. It is something he frequently brings up, both in interviews and in writing; did it have a profound effect on him?

"Yeah, it did. After my dad died in 2015 after what was a lifelong struggle with alcohol, I was in quite a state. I'd become profoundly affected by the level of homelessness in Birmingham. I spent a lot of time talking to homeless people about their journeys, and the thing that their stories always came back to is that there had been a twist of fate that had knocked them down.

"And my dad was hit by a twist of fate: he lost my mum when she was 52 to pancreatic cancer. But as a family, we'd done our best to catch him. The people I met sleeping on the streets of Birmingham didn't have nets to catch them. I found that really distressing.

"I think the political lesson that it really helped me see is that… it's only through collective action that you can build security for each and every one of us in a world where we get knocked down often in life."

For Byrne, liberty in the broadest sense is a central concern, as outlined in his 2022 Fabian pamphlet, Reclaiming Freedom.

"How much freedom is there for someone who is sleeping rough on the streets of Birmingham? Zero. Literally zero. They are trapped in a tyranny of poverty, and the only way that you can help people out of that kind of tyranny is by joining arms and lifting people up. And that's something that we do together."

Such idealism is refreshing at a time when Labour ministers are trailing what looks very much like a return to austerity. I get the sense that Byrne, who would once have been considered an arch-New Labourite, might now find himself closer to the centre, or even the centre-left, of the party. I'm interested to know what he thinks about the direction of travel. Surely we can't cut our way to prosperity, I say – so why is that the message coming from the government?

"I think the messaging coming out of government [needs to be] a lot clearer about what it is we're trying to do. And that's not a novel critique – that's something that's kind of widely felt in the parliamentary Labour party.

"What we're trying to do is to help people earn a better life, because we want them to have far greater control over their life, their options. We want to give people agency and freedoms that they don't have today.

I'm absolutely convinced that wealth inequality is the rocket fuel for populism

"And there's a really interesting new book that's coming out by Ezra Klein." (He's talking about Abundance, which has since been published.) "The argument he's making is that, actually, there are all kinds of options that are opening up ahead of us.

"If you think about the revolution underway now in genetic medicine or green energy, global gigabit connectivity, the rise of the global middle class, the next few years could be extraordinary.

"When Kristalina Georgieva [the head of the IMF] did her keynote speech in Cambridge last year, she made the point that living standards could multiply 13-fold over the course of the next century."

This sanguine vision strikes me as an implied criticism of our more-grey-than-red administration, although Byrne doesn't necessarily see it that way. He is keen to point out that The Inequality of Wealth was "deliberately written as a two-term project".

He hasn't let go of all his New Labour instincts, either: in true Blairite fashion, his book includes the results of specially-commissioned opinion polling on the policies he floats. Taken together with previous research, it paints a striking picture: British voters are pretty radical. It seems there is broad support, for example, for a wealth tax targeting the rich. Does Labour perhaps need to have a bit more faith in the public?

"I think two things here. There are 10 different permutations of [a wealth tax], everything from taxes on net household wealth, to capital gains tax equalisation, through to National Insurance contributions on investment income.

"And my first bit of advice is, stop talking about a wealth tax. We've got to get into the specifics of what kind of tax where we're talking about.

"I think the second point is that we have definitely got to take the public on a journey with this."

But *do* we need to take the public on a journey? Aren't they already there?

"So, I would say probably they are, but I think you've got to pressure-test this argument with the public. It now really needs stress-testing. And I think there's a number of organizations that are going to do that work this year."

I suspect Byrne might be being overly cautious. There's an odd reluctance within Labour circles to accept that voters share our values, even where there's good evidence that they do. Yet at least Byrne is willing to think outside the box first and ask the public what they think second. This seems more logical than taking for granted, as the party's strategists often seem to do, that the average British voter is irretrievably right-wing.

Byrne has already mentioned that he's embarking on his own project on populism. What will this look like?

"Bits of it are secret at the moment," he says. "But basically, there's a number of us who have come together to run a big project on the causes of populism.

"We're basically trying to map what I call autho-pop – authoritarian populism – [which] is quite a weird combination of traditional and techno- libertarianism, authoritarianism, and plutocracy."

Byrne highlights Peter Thiel, the billionaire founder of PayPal and Palantir, and vice-president JD Vance, Thiel's former employee, as key drivers of this syncretic project. He also draws attention to the writing of Curtis Yarvin, otherwise known as Mencius Moldbug, a far-right, neo-monarchist blogger who Vance has publicly cited.

"They've got a couple of things that they really major on – extreme free speech, extreme privacy, an obsession with cryptocurrency – but they're also quite autocratic," Byrne says.

"They hate democracy, and they're all for plutocracy, because they basically want to shut down the state and stop paying tax."

The influence of science fiction is evident, Byrne says.

"Look at the two books that are particularly influential in this community – Ayn Rand's Atlas Shrugged and Neil Stevenson's Snow Crash.

"[The latter] is the book that pioneered the idea of the metaverse, but if you kind of combine Neil Stevenson and Ayn Rand, what you get is the kleptoverse – this world where might makes right, where you've got extreme inequality, and where you've got a kind of a breakdown of society as we understand it today."

So these alt-right kingmakers read Snow Crash, a dystopian novel, and thought: 'that sounds great'?

"Yeah, exactly." He chuckles.

"It's basically a philosophy that is written by, and appeals to, boys who spend too long in their bedrooms. It's a strange philosophy, but it's potent, and it's real, and the vice president of the United States is amongst its chief cheerleaders. So it needs to be taken seriously."

Exiting Byrne's office is a shock. Across Parliament Square, an off-kilter rendition of Sandstorm by Darude, played on the horn of a protesting tractor, jolts me back to dismal March 2025. At least someone in Westminster still has hope. I pray it's infectious. F

Move fast and fix things

The UK can foster a 'third way' of accountable tech innovation, write *Sasjkia Otto* and *Alex Porter*

Sasjkia Otto is a senior researcher at the Fabian Society

Alex Porter is diversity and inclusion lead at Labour Digital

The internet – once a beacon of democratisation and empowerment – has been captured by a minority. Its pioneers envisioned a world where anyone could participate in a global conversation. But a gradual concentration of power has recast technology as something done to us, rather than something we use to make things better.

Today, conversations in the media and corridors of power are dominated by those who serve private interests over public good. This has narrowed debates and normalised false dichotomies that ask us to choose between our values on the one hand, and growth and prosperity on the other. Labour must now lead the world in setting a progressive vision to reclaim technology as a force for people, communities and democracy. This means dispensing with zero-sum narratives about tech to forge a third way between US laissez-faire and EU underinvestment – securing a future where innovation and accountability are two sides of the same coin.

To compromise on neither our values nor our prosperity, Britain must become the trailblazer that it was during the first industrial revolution. This process has already started. Take OpenSafely, for instance. Developed during the Covid-19 pandemic as a collaboration between British public and private institutions, it allows researchers to analyse patient records without ever seeing them. It has saved countless lives. Such examples show that with the right safeguards and incentives, we can use technology for good.

However, there is still a way to go. Important decisions that that affect us all are being taken by firms who do not share our interests. This has been destabilising for our democracy, with unclear benefits to our economy. To become a leader in progressive tech, we must resist this outsized influence and remain unapologetic about our values.

Opening up the conversation can inject the dose of innovation we need. We must include civil society and entrepreneurs based in communities across the country. We can start by considering five key objectives.

First, strengthening our sovereign technology capabilities. To lead a progressive race to the top globally, we must disentangle ourselves from interests that compromise our ability to act decisively. The UK must become a tech producer, not just a consumer, to become a rule maker rather than a rule taker. This means developing a vision for a sustainable and interoperable set of home-grown technologies that reflects our values (a 'UK stack'), and mission-based public and private investment to develop it.

Second, championing inclusive and sustainable growth. Every tech firm doing business in the UK must recognise the importance of ensuring that people across the country feel better off as a result. This will require innovation hubs throughout the country, and an active state to ensure that everybody sees a fair share of the benefits. We must also prioritise digital, people-centred public services during this parliament, while maintaining safeguards that protect citizens from state intrusion – especially given the very real risk of the far-right.

Third, democratising participation and power. To foster a nation of innovators, we must tackle digital divides and share power to shape technology's impact. No citizen, entrepreneur or public servant should be limited by a poor internet connection, restrictive technologies, or their background. This means we need a partnership between government, entrepreneurs, trade unions and civil society that empowers people and workers to use technology as a tool to build the life they want.

Fourth, fostering accountable innovation. We must reject the binary of heavy-handed regulation versus free-market control. Regulation must be agile and well targeted so that responsible innovation can thrive. To this end, we need stronger transparency mandates to enable regulators to respond proportionately to emerging risks. We need support for competition, including red lines so citizens feel safe and confident to try new services. And we need to address gaps in sectoral regulators' powers and capacity.

Fifth, building global alliances. We must work with like-minded countries to regulate, tax and secure investment in a way that protects democracy. The government should identify and strengthen partnerships with countries that can help support this vision, and be a first mover in international governance developments.

A progressive technology policy is vital to governing effectively in the 21st century and securing re-election. The Labour government must seize the opportunity to lead with ambition. The next great industrial revolution is already underway. We can shape it, or be shaped by it. **F**

Off target

A sporting boycott of Afghanistan would stifle a symbol of resistance to Taliban rule, writes *Peymana Assad*

Peymana Assad is a Labour councillor in Harrow. Upon her election in 2018, she became the first person of Afghan origin elected to public office in the UK. She is the cofounder and chair of the Labour Foreign Policy Group

Sports – and international sports in particular – tend to become embroiled in the issues of the day. In 1980, for instance, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the US boycotted the Moscow Olympics after the Olympic Committee refused President Carter's request to change the venue. Around the same time, my father, then a member of the Afghan National Hockey Team, recalls how mujahideen commanders – backed by the US and Pakistan against the Soviets – regularly congratulated the team on international matches and sent messages of support.

Today, Afghanistan once again sits at the intersection of sports and global affairs. With the return of the Taliban, there are calls for a sporting boycott – specifically of the cricket team, as urged by Tonia Antoniazzi MP before England's match on 27 February. However, I believe any boycott would be a mistake, ignoring as it does the symbolic value of cricket for those resisting Taliban rule.

Afghan cricketers defy the Taliban

Under the Taliban's first rule, cricket was banned. After 2001, Afghanistan's cricket team formed with no funding, playing under the tricolour flag – a symbol millions fought under to free Afghanistan from colonialism.

Today, the team still raises the tricolour flag and sings the national anthem – both now banned by the Taliban. Many Afghans have been imprisoned or killed for doing the same. The team is even prohibited from playing inside Afghanistan – cricket is a 'sport of the infidels'.

When the Taliban took power in 2021, Afghanistan was set to play in the T20 World Cup. The Taliban demanded the team use their white flag and replace the anthem with an Islamic prayer. The players refused, saying they'd rather withdraw. After intervention from the International Cricket Council (ICC) and Qatar, the Taliban backed down.

In their first match post-Taliban takeover, Afghanistan played against Scotland, raising the tricolour flag and singing the anthem. Captain Mohammad Nabi was in tears. The team's success is an act of defiance, proving that the ideals Afghans fought for live on.

Afghan cricketers also face the same oppression as the rest of the population. They live in Afghanistan, and their own daughters are denied education – just like millions of other Afghan girls.

Publicly opposing the Taliban is a death sentence

Some argue Afghan cricketers should publicly denounce the Taliban. But the Taliban are not just an authoritarian regime – they are an armed extremist group that kills those who defy them. Even families of journalists and activists who speak out have been targeted.

Despite the risks, players like Gulbadin Naib have made silent but powerful impact. He donated his man of the match winnings to Afghan flood victims in the north of the country, highlighting the Taliban's refusal to help disaster-stricken areas. Other cricketers support Afghan causes with their earnings.

A boycott would feed dangerous ethnic divisions

Separatist diaspora groups have exploited the boycott campaign to fuel ethnic tensions, misleading British MPs. They claim that since both the Taliban and much of the Afghan cricket team share the same ethnic background, the team must be a PR tool of the regime.

This argument is not only false but dangerous. Afghanistan's cricket team was founded after the fall of the first Taliban regime in 2001 and has always represented the country as a whole. The claim echoes outdated colonial narratives that associate Pashtuns – the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan – with extremism, ignoring the fact that past Pashtun leaders, such as King Amanullah Khan and Prince Daud Khan, championed women's rights and education. Holding Afghan cricketers accountable for the Taliban's actions solely because they are Pashtun amounts to collective punishment. Pashtuns themselves are also suffering greatly under the Taliban's rule.

When the British Chargé d'Affaires takes pictures with the Taliban, standing next to their flag and smiling with them, it's not considered propaganda. But when the

Afghan cricket team does the same to ensure they can continue playing, critics accuse them of being Taliban puppets. The hypocrisy is rife – we need to hold our own government officials to account before pointing fingers at Afghans forced to survive under a brutal regime.

Boycotting the men's team won't help Afghan women's cricket

A key argument for boycotting the men's team is that the Taliban has erased Afghan women's cricket. But instead of punishing the men's team, efforts should focus on supporting Afghan women's teams in exile. The issue is not the participation of the Afghan men's team – it's the Taliban's repression.

A simple solution exists: The ICC can invest in Afghan women's cricket in exile, providing financial and logistical support so that they can compete internationally. This would send a direct message to the Taliban that banning women from sports is unacceptable.

Currently, the ICC doesn't recognise the Afghan women's cricket team (currently in exile in Australia) because Taliban laws inside Afghanistan ban women from sports. But if a majority of countries in the world do not recognise the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, what is stopping the ICC from making a far more powerful statement than any boycott of the men's team?

Joy as a form of resistance

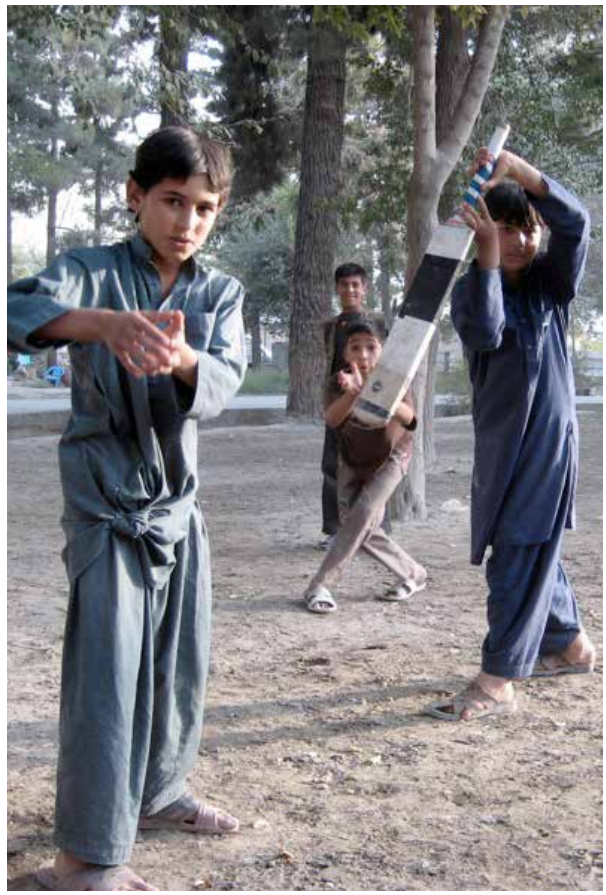
Throughout history, joy has been an act of resistance. The Taliban enforces a joyless rule – banning music, books, and free thought. Cricket, and the symbols it upholds, represent resilience and defiance. Every time the Afghan flag is raised, every time the anthem is sung, it reminds Afghans that their identity and history cannot be erased.

British MPs may dismiss this argument, but for Afghans, seeing their flag at international events offers a rare glimmer of hope. Just look at the celebrations when Afghanistan knocked England out of the ICC Champions Trophy on February 27 – fans inside Afghanistan, in exile, and even in Pakistan's Gaddafi stadium erupted with joy.

A boycott sends the wrong message

Some argue that even if a boycott doesn't force change, it still signals opposition to gender apartheid. But the world has already normalised the Taliban in far more significant ways, including the signing of the Doha deal, which is a surrender deal in the eyes of many Afghans; continuing financial aid to the Taliban from the US and Europe; the UAE and China accepting Taliban ambassadors; and European governments shutting down Afghan embassies, making it harder for exiled Afghans to get consular support. In September 2024, the Afghan embassy in London closed – according to the ambassador, at the request of the new Labour government.

The Taliban won't care if Afghanistan is banned from cricket. Indeed, they see cricket as the enemy. A boycott would only isolate ordinary Afghans while international governments cosy up to the Taliban regime.



Afghanistan needs real action, not gestures

If the international community is serious about holding the Taliban accountable, it should:

- Recognise gender apartheid at the International Court of Justice.
- Issue international criminal court arrest warrants for Taliban leaders and their enablers.
- Impose travel bans on Taliban officials and supporters.
- Refuse to recognise the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government.
- Impose economic sanctions and cut off aid that benefits the Taliban.

If sporting bodies want to help, they should officially recognise Afghan women's teams in exile and provide them with financial and logistical support to play.

A boycott of the Afghan men's cricket team won't punish the Taliban – it will punish athletes who have defied them. It will weaken a nation that overwhelmingly rejects the Taliban and allows the international community to substitute real action with empty gestures. Afghanistan deserves better. **F**

Firm foundations

A Musk-style coup is hard to imagine in Britain, argues *Kate Dewsnip*

Kate Dewsnip is a contributing writer at the Constitution Society. She is a graduate teaching fellow and PhD candidate at the University of Liverpool's school of law and social justice

As many feared, the first few weeks of Donald Trump's second presidential term have proven highly constitutionally controversial. From his prolific use of executive orders to dramatically expand the powers and remit of the US executive branch to his apparent contempt for the rule of law ("He who saves his Country does not violate any Law"), President Trump evidently has no issue flouting constitutional norms. Perhaps the most controversial move of all has been his appointment of a private, unelected individual to seemingly lay siege to the US's vast federal bureaucracy. The private individual in question? Elon Musk – the world's richest man.

Musk has been placed in this position through the creation of the Department of Government Efficiency, or 'Doge' for short, which he seemingly heads. Doge was established by a presidential executive order signed on Trump's first full day in office, ostensibly to "modernize Federal technology and software to maximize governmental efficiency and productivity." However, in recent weeks, Musk's Doge teams have moved with unprecedented speed to infiltrate various government agencies, initiating widespread employment terminations and accessing highly sensitive government data. Unsurprisingly, such actions have triggered widespread alarm. Many have issued warnings about a lack of adequate oversight, while others have questioned Musk's motivations, cautioning that he may use the classified information he acquires for his own personal gain. Such concerns have ultimately led to legal proceedings against Musk and his team, with a federal judge issuing a temporary injunction preventing Doge from accessing the US Treasury Department's digital files.

In light of Musk's rapid rise to power in the US, many in the UK are beginning to wonder: could the same thing happen here? More specifically, is the UK's constitutional system similarly vulnerable to a 'coup' of the kind currently unfolding in America?

Perhaps the most logical starting point when considering these questions is to ascertain exactly what Elon Musk's formal role is and, consequently, what the legal parameters of this role are. After a period of notable ambiguity, the White House revealed that Musk is a 'special government employee' (SGE), serving as a senior advisor to the president. SGEs, as defined by Title 18 of the US Code, were created by Congress in 1962 to enable the federal government to benefit from the advice of experts employed in the private sector. Interestingly, the inclusion of 'employee' in SGE is somewhat misleading, as SGEs are only ever appointed on a temporary basis – they may only be "retained, designated, appointed, or employed" by the government for "not more than 130 days" during any consecutive 365-day period. Any federal department can, and frequently does, engage experts in this manner. However, it appears that Musk is providing 'expert' advice directly to the president, which Trump is subsequently implementing through executive orders.

In the UK, the role most comparable to that of an SGE is a special adviser (or spad for short). Spads are appointed by individual cabinet ministers in accordance with Part 1 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 for the purposes of providing minsters with partisan advice and support. As such, they are not civil servants (although they may work closely alongside them) due to the party-political nature of their role.

The prime minister commonly appoints several special advisors, some of whom exert significant influence over government policy. Notable examples include Alastair Campbell, who served as Tony Blair's chief adviser and press secretary; Morgan McSweeney, Keir Starmer's current chief of staff; and, perhaps most infamously, Dominic Cummings, who was Boris Johnson's chief adviser from 2019 to 2020. Like Musk, all of these individuals were or are unelected private figures exercising authority over their respective administration's policy and communications.

Cummings is of particular interest here, as he consistently attacked the British civil service throughout his relatively short but impactful time in post. Just like Musk, he called for a Whitehall "revolution" and advocated for the hiring of "weirdos and misfits." Granted, he did not go so far as to persuade the prime minister to create an entirely new government department to oversee civil servants' performance, but the comparison still stands. It also shows that it is possible, in theory, for a Musk-style takeover to be pursued by a senior spad within the UK's constitutional system. It is also entirely possible for a British prime minister to unilaterally create a new

government department comparable to Doge, as they have almost unlimited authority to amend the structure of government.

However, in practice, the extent of what a Musk-style adviser could achieve in the UK is likely far more limited than in the US due to the role of parliament and the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. Although the British prime minister does possess powers akin to the president's ability to issue executive orders courtesy of the royal prerogative, the scope of these powers is narrow. In response to Gina Miller's 2016 legal challenge, the supreme court determined that the prime minister must seek prior parliamentary approval to utilise their royal prerogative powers in such a manner that would affect primary legislation. Thus, the prime minister could not unilaterally enact significant constitutional change without the consent of both Houses of Parliament. Despite governments typically commanding a significant majority in the House of Commons, it is highly unlikely – at least in the current political climate – that a prime minister could persuade both MPs and peers to embrace radical constitutional changes akin to those envisioned by Trump and Musk. The House of Lords, in particular, would be highly unlikely to approve such changes.

In practice, the extent of what a Musk-style adviser could achieve in the UK is likely far more limited than in the US due to the role of parliament and the principle of parliamentary sovereignty

Furthermore, the independence of the UK's judiciary serves as a crucial safeguard against radical constitutional reforms. Unlike the US president, the prime minister has no control over the composition of the supreme court, ensuring that personal politics do not influence judicial rulings. If parliament ever attempted to limit the courts' ability to review their actions, it is likely that judges would uphold a strict interpretation of the rule of law by interpreting 'ouster clauses' as ones that parliament never intended to enact. This position is consistent with precedents like Anisminic Ltd. v. Foreign Compensation Commission (1968), where the courts maintained their jurisdiction despite legislative attempts to exclude it. Of course, it is hypothetically possible that a tyrannical government, emboldened by a rebellious parliament, could ignore such a judgment; however, no British prime minister has ever refused to abide by a supreme court ruling (even Boris Johnson promptly reconvened parliament in the wake of the second Miller judgment). If that were to happen, the British constitution would be left in tatters.

Ultimately, although a hostile takeover of the UK executive by a private individual is theoretically possible, it is highly improbable in practice. Although uncodified, the UK's constitution incorporates robust checks and balances that have historically functioned effectively. As discussed above, for an individual similar to Musk, even with the backing of a complicit prime minister, to impose tyrannical rule and undermine the current constitutional system, they would need to persuade the Cabinet, both Houses of Parliament (Commons and Lords), and the supreme court of their cause, or somehow bypass these institutions entirely – rendering the success of such an endeavour extremely unlikely. **F**

Books

Family resemblance

Hayek's Bastards by Quinn Slobodian is fascinating and worrying in equal measure, finds *Stewart Lansley*

Stewart Lansley is a council member of the Progressive Economy Forum, and the author of The Richer, The Poorer: How Britain Enriched the Few and Failed the Poor, a 200 year history, Bristol University Press

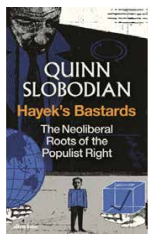
Hayek's Bastards is the third book on the history of neoliberalism by Quinn Slobodian, a prominent Canadian historian of ideas. His second book, Crack-up Capitalism, began with a telling quote from US billionaire Peter Thiel: "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." Two years on, Thiel, JD Vance's former employer and a supporter of Trump's campaign for the presidency, now has a claim to being one of the most influential people in the world. Several of his super-rich allies are today engaged in dismantling parts of the American state.

Hayek's Bastards traces the deep roots of the rise of today's populist right and its attacks on democracy, civil rights, feminism, and climate change. It is sometimes suggested that this new authoritarianism offers an alternative to the neoliberal agenda, which, having seen off the postwar high-water mark of social democracy and its egalitarian architects, is facing its own crisis of survival. In Slobodian's view, however, the populist right's resurgence can be seen as a straightforward extension of neoliberal doctrines.

In particular, he argues that right populism emerged out of attempts to counter the immensely influential new social movements which had begun to capture the political agenda from the 1980s onward. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, meetings of the Mont Pelerin society (formed in 1947 by the godfathers of neoliberalism, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek) became consumed with the way the main threat to liberty, as they saw it, had shifted from 'red to green'. This became a defining theme of neoliberalism's new cheerleaders. "The enemy has mutated", as Victoria Curzon-Price, one of only two female presidents of the society, put it. "The founders of our Society once battled communism, planning and hard Keynesianism. Today our opponents are more elusive."

Fearing that the growing success of progressive movements would promote government dependency and weaken the drive to freedom, markets, and self-reliance, Slobodian writes, Hayek's disciples set about challenging, "the poison of civil rights, feminism, affirmative action and ecological consciousness [in] the veins of the body politic."

The roots of today's new-right thinking run deep. Mises and Hayek drew on a number of early thinkers, including the Anglo-Dutch philosopher Bernard Mandeville. His infamous Fable of the Bees, published in 1715, argued that 'Private Vices bring Public Benefits'. For him, the individual pursuit of greed and wealth was good for society. There was also Herbert Spencer's social Darwinism, and his belief in the 'survival of the fittest', with the corresponding idea that society's divisions are justly based on merit.



Hayek's Bastards
Quinn Slobodian
(Penguin, £25)

To build an 'antidote' to these progressive movements, neoliberal thinkers on the right turned, in the 1990s, towards promoting the idea of a natural, inbuilt hierarchy of gender, race and cultural difference. Drawing on the language of science, from cognitive psychology to genetics, their goal has been to reinstate the idea of 'natural competitiveness' into the way societies work. Forging alliances with racial psychologists, neoconfederates, ethnonationalists – groups which would later become part of the 'alt-right' – the new task has been to "roll back social changes to return to a hierarchy of gender, race and cultural difference they imagined to be rooted in genetics as a tradition."

Slobodian's immensely disturbing account traces the diverse 'bastard' soldiers of this counterrevolution, including the libertarian economist and founder of anarcho-capitalism, Murray Rothbard; the author of The Bell Curve, Charles Murray; the libertarian president of Argentina, Javier Milei; and Hungary's Viktor Orbán. It charts the way the central strains of new far-right thinking emerged from neoliberalism, not in opposition to it. Far from an ideological backlash against globalisation and the freeing up of markets, the populist right movement is really neoliberalism in new clothing.

The vision espoused by the dissident right is already taking shape, most spectacularly in the United States. One of those who has the ear of the new American administration is Curtis Yarvin. He is an extreme right-wing philosopher and blogger who writes about replacing American democracy with a techno-monarchy and is a key influence over JD Vance. Sometimes seen as the "house philosopher" of the New Right, Yarvin has called the civil rights movement a "black rage industry" and said the American people must "get over their dictator-phobia". That more or less sums it up. **F**

Forging ahead

Natalie Wright documents the contributions of early Fabian Edith Morley

Natalie Wright is an independent researcher working at the National Archives. She is currently working on her first book, a history of women working in academic English departments

Edith Morley, who lived from 1875 to 1964, is one of many figures who in her day made a tangible difference to the world around her, and yet has since fallen into relative obscurity. In more recent years, she has gained some recognition for her most obvious achievement – becoming the first woman to be made a professor of English in England, at the University of Reading in 1908 – but Morley's contributions span far beyond this accolade. More than most literary professors, she was involved in many of the socio-political movements that were transforming Britain in the early twentieth century.

Morley was born in London in 1875 to a wealthy family. She was allowed to attend school – at that time still a rarity for girls of her class – and later university, at King's College Ladies' Department. She was one of the first women to study English language and literature, at a time when women occupied a sort of hinterland in universities, often being able to study but not take exams, or take exams but not gain the same qualifications as men, in premises usually affiliated with, but not members of, the major universities. Going against the grain once again, she starting working: teaching English and German, first ad hoc at King's and then, in 1901, at the University College in Reading. Several years later, in 1908, Reading began the transition to becoming a university, and made all the heads of departments a professor – except Morley. Upon discovering this, she threatened to resign, and only then was awarded a professorship.

Her aim, in keeping with the Fabian mission, was to arm women with information so that they could better negotiate pay and better understand their terms of employment

The omission was undoubtedly due to the fact that Morley was the only woman at that level. She explains in her memoir, Looking Before and After (written in the 1940s and published in 2016): "I have always regarded the long struggle about my position and title as my contribution to the battle for fair dealing for women in public and professional life'. It was a battle she never quite won, because the university insisted on making her professor of English language only, so that they could justify appointing a man as professor of English literature alongside her. As Morley was not a language specialist (her major work was on an edited collection by the essayist Henry Crabb Robinson), she tried to explain that her title was inaccurate and effectively demoted her in her own field of literature. Perceiving her as a troublemaker, the university punished her by making her officially subordinate to the new male professor.

Morley's experiences in the workplace informed her political leanings, which had first been ignited by William Morris's novel News from Nowhere (1890) and by work in a local women's settlement while a student. In 1908, she joined the Fabian Society and became involved in the newly set up Women's Group. She explains in her memoir that she was attracted by their emphasis on 'specific measure of social reform' and '[f]acts [...] irrespective of bias', something she took to heart while editing a publication for them, Women Workers in Seven Professions: A Survey of Their Economic Position (1914). Morley herself

contributed a section to the book on women in academia, providing an overview of current university fees and available funding, the number of women employees and current salaries. Her aim, in keeping with the Fabian mission, was to arm women with information so that they could better negotiate pay and better understand their terms of employment. In the book, she lamented that it had been difficult to get women to talk about their finances, but her efforts were recognised as of 'utmost value' to the society and she was asked to assist with future research.

Both Morley and the Fabian Women's Group in general at this time articulated demands beyond those usually associated with the suffrage movement. In a 1914 article, for example, she argued: 'the vote is but a symbol' on the basis that it would not directly help lower-class women. She argued that a major problem was that women were 'economically dependent on individual men […] whatever the intrinsic value of their unpaid work' and that therefore 'the community must compensate' women for motherhood. The extent to which her views transcended her class is evident in a 1916 pamphlet she wrote on John Ruskin, who she admired for his belief that 'social evils went too deep for philanthropic tinkering'. Going beyond tinkering herself for women's suffrage, Morley participated in collective tax resistance, which led to some of her belongings being sold at auction, and, in 1911, she spent the night 'marching up and down' Aldeburgh beach with Elizabeth Garrett Anderson so that they would not be counted in the census. Morley was still hard at work twenty years later coordinating Reading's child refugee programme during the second world war, which was particularly noteworthy as she was Jewish. She received an OBE for her work.

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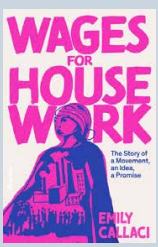
Morley was not an especially renowned scholar, but contributed a significant amount to the rapidly-changing world around her. She was deeply affected by the hardships she had witnessed and used her relative privilege to try to help others wherever possible. In her social research, she was galvanised by the Fabian aspiration towards what she called the: "testing and discovery of truth [...] as ammunition for speakers and politicians." While in her professional life, Morley suffered the solitude of being a pioneer, in her political life she embraced collective action and collective purpose. **F**

THE FABIAN QUIZ

WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

Emily Callaci



It is perhaps fitting that Isaac Singer, the inventor of the mass-produced home sewing machine whose antecedents still bear his name, was a serial exploiter of women. Fathering nearly 30 children with at least five women over the course of his life – usually bigamously – Singer, much like his machine, gave with one hand and took with the other.

While the 'Model T of sewing machines' drastically reduced the time many women spent on making and mending clothes, it also initiated a shift in the clothing industry towards 18-hour days for working-class women, and helped create a moral panic that replaced drudgery with intense social scrutiny. Nearly two centuries later, the picture remains mixed at best: the latest available data shows that employed women spend about 2.3 hours daily on housework; for employed men, this figure is only 1.6 hours.

In the 1970s, a network of feminists responded to such inequity with a simple demand: wages for housework. In her new book, historian Emily Callaci tells the story of this campaign by exploring the lives of its key figures – and the profound implications of their ideas.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
What sort of hand-stitch might you use to close the seam of a pillow 'invisibly'? Choose from a ladder stich; a cross-stitch; or a French knot.

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

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 15 MAY 2025.

Listings

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

BOURNEMOUTH
Contact Dan Moore:
bournemouthfabiansociety@gmail.com

BRIGHTON AND HOVE
Meetings at Friends Meeting House, Ship Street, Brighton BN1 1AF
Contact Stephen Ottaway:
stephenottaway1@gmail.com

CENTRAL LONDON
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