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FABIAN SOCIETY

FABIAN REVIEW
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Sunnu Rebecca Choi

Time to regroup

Labour can win across the country by building on the spending review, writes *Joe Dromey*

Two election results have inspired hope and fear in the Labour movement in recent months. The Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse byelection for the Scottish parliament was an outstanding result for Scottish Labour. The victory confounded the pundits, and surprised the SNP, who had pitched it as a two-horse race between them and Reform. The result has given real momentum to Anas Sarwar and his team ahead of the crucial Scottish elections next May.

The SNP has been dominant in Holyrood for nearly two decades. But while its electoral success is impressive, its record in government is woeful. The next election will be a battle of framing. The SNP will – as it always does – seek to blame Westminster for all of Scotland's woes to deflect from its own failures and inaction. Scottish Labour will need both to expose the SNP's incompetence, and to give Scottish voters hope for a better future.

This edition of Fabian Review looks ahead to those elections. We speak to Labour's candidate for first minister, and we hear from key figures across Scottish Labour about the battle of ideas ahead of the Scottish elections.

We also look forward to elections to the Senedd next May. Welsh Labour has been in power since the dawn of devolution. But with Labour as the incumbents in both Cardiff and Westminster, we face a stiff challenge from both the nationalist left and the populist right.

While the byelection in Scotland was a welcome boost for morale, the local elections in May were a very different story. President Obama memorably described his first mid-term results as a 'shellacking'. Unfortunately, the results of the local elections in England were little short of a shellacking for Labour.

Perhaps the real story of the local elections was the revolution on the right. While the results were bad for Labour, they were near existential for the Conservatives. They slipped into fourth place, losing both the vast majority of their councillors and all hope that their new leader can stop the rot.

The results in May, and the polling since, suggest that the main challenge at the next election will come not from a revived Conservative party, but from an insurgent Reform. Farage's party secured a victory that far surpassed expectations and exceeded anything achieved by his previous vehicles. And it is no longer just a party of England; Reform are polling strongly in Wales and in Scotland, too.

This raises the question of how Labour responds to the threat of an insurgent populist right. Some would argue that Labour should narrow the gap with Reform by shifting right on immigration and cultural issues, and diluting our commitment to net zero. This would be a mistake. As fascinating analysis by Persuasion UK recently showed, the number of Reform-curious Labour voters is relatively small. And if we were to chase these voters to the right, we would risk haemorrhaging voters to parties of the left and centre.

Instead, we need to stay true to our values, retain our radicalism, and focus on delivery. The spending review in June was very encouraging. The huge investment in affordable and social housing will help get Britain building again and tackle the housing crisis. The new transport infrastructure across the country will help drive regional growth. And the extension of free school meals will make a huge difference to low-income families. Though, as we recently set out, we will need to see further action in the child poverty strategy later this year.

The local election results are a cause for alarm, but they are not a reason to panic. The surge in support for Reform is a sign that voters are at risk of losing faith in our political system after a decade of stagnation and decay. If we can grow the economy in a way that voters can feel in their living standards, and if we can improve public services in a way that people can see, then Labour will be in a strong position to retain that faith – and to win again. **F**

Shortcuts

SURE THING

Sure Start had unprecedented benefits for British society
— Jatinder Hayre

Sure Start is more than a nostalgic emblem of the New Labour government. As my latest research shows, it is a proven engine for levelling Britain's most stubborn inequities. Published in the British Medical Journal, the paper provides the largest analysis of the Sure Start programme to date, utilising over two decades of research. It confirms what many have long suspected: the Sure Start programme delivered unusually powerful health and social benefits.

Where local authorities have sustained or revived the programme, children gain on three fronts that define life chances. Physically, children benefit from many fewer emergency hospital admissions, a notable drop in early-years obesity, a reduction in accidental injuries, enhanced dental hygiene, and improved breastfeeding rates in the neonatal period. Educationally and socially, they reach school gates with sharper literacy, stronger classroom engagement and fewer exclusions. Sure Start also significantly reduces special education needs and disabilities (SEND) rates. Neuro-developmentally, children engaging with Sure Start have lower rates of ADHD and conduct disorder, with long-term clinical stability of symptoms, easing pressure on families, teachers and overstretched child and adolescent mental health service teams. In short, Sure Start delivers healthier bodies, readier minds and calmer communities: outcomes no serious government can ignore.

Even on a purely financial level, the returns on investment from Sure Start are impressive. In a given area, one additional Sure Start centre per 1,000 children aged 0-4 averts roughly seven per cent of hospital admissions at age five, among the costliest items on the NHS ledger. The programme's impact on healthy weight guards against future cardiometabolic disease, while the stabilisation of ADHD and conduct disorder (CD) symptoms reduces demand for specialist mental health and youth justice services. ADHD and CD also drive exclusions, depress GCSE scores and swell justice costs. A life-course model embedded in the review estimates a £4 return for every £1 invested, once healthier adulthood, higher earnings and lower welfare claims are counted. Few Whitehall initiatives can match that yield. A future expansion of Sure Start, then, could release fiscal headroom for the long-term investment Britain so badly needs.

An expansion of Sure Start could also help the government deliver on its opportunity mission. Children growing up near vibrant Sure Start centres consistently outperform their peers in the year 1 phonics screen, even after deprivation and parental education are accounted for. Centres embed parent-child reading, language rich play and rapid referrals for speech delays, interventions no policy in reception classes can replicate in isolation. Labour's promise to end the link between background and attainment depends on vigorous, community-rooted pre-school investment. A universal, proudly branded Sure Start would align the party's educational ambition with its historic commitment to collective provision.

My research chronicles the programme's birth under Labour, contraction under the coalition and patchwork survival thereafter. Going forward, children's prospects should not hinge on the fiscal weather. Parliament should legislate for a statutory minimum per-child early-years spend, indexed to inflation and reviewed every five years by an independent commission.

Crucially, a renewed Sure Start must be universal. With nearly three in 10 British children in relative poverty, tightly targeted schemes often fail families just above means testing thresholds. Evaluations show that universal offers, weighted to deprivation, secure higher uptake and better outcomes than narrow gatekeeping. A renewed Sure Start should therefore guarantee every family core services – including health visiting, stay-and-play, and speech screening – while intensifying home visits, breastfeeding support and debt advice in the poorest wards. Proportionate universalism can avoid stigma, build broad political backing and maximise impact.

Of course, a wider programme of reform is important. Sure Start's successes rest on multidisciplinary teams: health visitors, nursery nurses, and speech and language therapists, whose expertise is leaching away under pay restraint. The government must back a national pay spine, protected professional development budgets, and research-in-practice fellowships. Retaining talent is cheaper than perpetual recruitment, and safeguards the relational continuity on which neurodevelopmental and literacy gains depend.

Seventy-five years ago, Beveridge named ignorance and disease as giants stalking post-war Britain. In 2025 their heirs are vocabulary gaps, rising obesity and surging neurodevelopmental diagnoses. A fully funded Sure Start is a ready-made antidote: healthier bodies, readier minds,

Russ Hamer, CC BY-SA 3.0

calmer streets and a four-to-one fiscal return. Reinvestment is not nostalgia; it is the rational route to inclusive growth. For Labour, Sure Start should be seen as the golden opportunity that it is. By pledging to restore Sure Start centres, finance them on a progressive-universalist formula, embed workforce guarantees, and legislate a spending floor, the party can fuse its egalitarian heritage with prevention-first economics. The dividends – safer children, stronger schools, and lighter burden on the NHS – will outlast any single parliament and anchor a genuinely fairer Britain. F

Dr Jatinder Hayre is a medical doctor and public health academic with a research interest in health equity, particularly early-years interventions. He is the author of the recent book The Lost Generation of Covid-19

STRICTLY NECESSARY

Labour's housebuilding drive should be accompanied by nationwide infrastructure requirements — *Margaret Mullane MP*

There can be no question that there is a nationwide need for new homes – and in particular, a desperate requirement for truly affordable homes at social rent levels. As such, the government's target of 1.5m new homes by the end of this parliament is appropriate. However, I believe there must be an equal emphasis on infrastructure, with a view to building communities and creating places where people choose to put down roots.

As the MP for Dagenham and Rainham, I am constantly reminded of what good planning can accomplish. The Becontree estate, comprising over 30,000 homes, was built during the interwar years. At that time, planners understood that the task was not only to deliver housing units to clear the slums of east London; it was to create a community. They made sure it had all the ingredients for long-term success: parks with lidos, other green spaces, GP surgeries, primary and secondary schools, shopping parades, adequate drainage, etc. Also integral was good access to transport links.

Quality and quantity, are, of course, closely entwined. Over recent years, we have heard a lot about 'nimbys' campaigning against new housing schemes. Often, one of the concerns of residents about new housing near them – and a perfectly justifiable concern at that – is that their existing social and public transport infrastructure is creaking at the seams. Residents will say: "try getting a GP appointment," or: "we can't get our daughter into the local school." Where such problems exist, local feeling about a proposed development is likely to depend on whether new homes are accompanied by the health centres, schools and public transport connections needed for new and existing communities to thrive. Currently, councils can make new developments conditional on the completion of related infrastructure projects through so-called 'Grampian conditions'. Yet local authority planning departments are painfully overstretched, and often do not have the resources to successfully rebut the standard challenge from developers that infrastructure and facility provisions would make a given project unviable.

The answer could be a national Grampian-style condition on major housing schemes, imposed through the planning system, which would restrict the building of new homes until essential infrastructure is put in place. (Of course, even for smaller schemes, proper account needs to be taken of the capacity of facilities in the area.)

I have no doubt that developers and others will howl "it's not fair" – and claim that such a change would reduce housing output. Indeed, I recall one conversation with a developer in which they stated, as a matter of fact: "our job is to build the houses, the infrastructure is your [meaning politicians] problem". Yet homes at any cost is a mantra which will do more to usher in the social problems of the future than anything else. The postwar Labour government understood this, and made good use of 'special development orders' to ensure that infrastructure was a key feature of their new towns. We need to reimagine this approach.

I welcome the measures in the planning and infrastructure bill to deliver more nationally significant infrastructure projects like data centres, reservoirs, and projects related to Great British Energy. However, nothing exists either in the current planning system, or in upcoming legislation, to ensure that social infrastructure, public services, and amenities are delivered as part of large-scale housing developments. This has the potential to be a devastating oversight. Given the ongoing housing crisis, and the resulting drive to deliver homes at pace, we cannot rely on discretionary council powers to deliver the infrastructure we need.

Ultimately, we need to move away from a focus on unit delivery and back to a model of placemaking, with the needs of local communities at its heart. This will take more than developer contributions, grant funding, council-level Grampian conditions or the community infrastructure levy: there must be a categoric requirement within the planning system to deliver infrastructure alongside homes. F

Margaret Mullane is the Labour MP for Dagenham and Rainham

PROLES APART

Labour's future lies in the shared economic interests of the middle and working classes — *Adam Hurst*

The growth of Reform is a major challenge, not just for Labour, but for our society and the liberal democratic values it is based on.

The task now for centre-left parties is to unify the middle and working classes, rather than viewing them as disparate groups. The term "working people", often used by the government, is useful here, since it encompasses blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, and so-called pink-collar workers – predominantly female frontline employees in care, catering, retail, and other service sectors. The key distinguishing feature of these groups is the same as that of the working class as conceived by Marx: their economic wellbeing depends on their earnings from work (which, on average, will account for 90 percent of their total income over a lifetime).

Reform UK and other populist parties are adept at creating divisions among working people. It may be tempting to respond in kind, but the lines drawn by the populist right are becoming steadily less relevant. It is important, for example, to scrutinise closely the distinction made between graduates and non-graduates. As the number of graduates

in the economy has risen, their earnings premium has decreased substantially over the last 30 years, and many more recent graduates must repay substantial student loans. This trend is especially evident in public sector and frontline health and social care jobs, and often affects women disproportionately. We should be cautious about contributing to the narrative that certain working people are part of an elite that exploits the 'true' working class. All the while, of course, there is a growing disparity between wage earners and those who possess assets and wealth.

Mark Rusling's observation in the winter edition of the Fabian Review that half of the individuals who voted for Reform UK support some form of wealth redistribution is significant. This is fertile territory on which to base a challenge to the right by questioning how, if elected to government, they would address the increasing share of national wealth directed towards those whose income comes from investments and savings since 1979. Our own communications – not to mention policies – must unequivocally demonstrate that we are committed to addressing the skewed national wealth distribution.

This is not to say that the economy is all that matters. Rusling is right to argue that we need to reclaim the national flag. It should be flying as we launch a crusade against cuts and austerity. We can build on the general election campaign by heavily featuring the union jack in our future publicity material. In general, however, we should not ape the right's policies, nor accept their diagnoses of Britain's problems. The depletion of our public services and the decline in our living standards are related to our unequal wealth distribution, not immigration or asylum policies.

To build a coalition of workers, it is essential that we do not only focus on the living standards of the poorest households. Although austerity measures have significantly impacted the lowest earners, many households living in relative poverty have earnings slightly above the thresholds for targeted benefits such as free school meals, free prescriptions, and council tax relief. The freezing of the income tax allowance disproportionately affects individuals with below-average incomes who are not eligible for means-tested support. Additionally, local councils have been compelled to increase council tax rates above the rate of inflation (and often earnings) while simultaneously reducing services. This is partly because of cuts to funding from central government, but also because of increasing demand for social care and homelessness support, which local authorities are statutorily obliged to provide.

At both the local and national levels, then, individuals with average incomes have been contributing additional taxes for services aimed at vulnerable populations. Meanwhile, their own living standards remain largely unchanged, and the quality of universal services like the NHS and state education has been declining. Centre-left parties must ensure the responsibility of addressing poverty does not disproportionately affect middle-income wage and salary earners by adjusting taxation to be more progressive, particularly by targeting higher earners with significant income from assets and investments. And, if higher taxes on earned income are needed, they must be accompanied by concrete improvements in public services. By uniting working people – who are, after all, the majority – we can create an unstoppable political force. **F**

Adam Hurst was a city councillor in Sheffield for nine years. He successfully defended his seat against a strong Ukip challenge in 2016

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AIMING HIGH

Left-behind towns are key to economic growth
— *Harpreet Uppal MP*

Huddersfield is no stranger to ambition. In front of our spectacular train station stands a statue of Huddersfield native Harold Wilson, who, at the age of 10, told his mother: "I am going to be prime minister."

Wilson's vision of a technological revolution was rooted in the belief that talent could be found in every corner of the country. However, in the many decades since his premiership, towns – and especially northern towns like Huddersfield – have been overlooked. National conversations about growth and investment have focused almost entirely on cities, leaving behind the places that powered the industrial revolution and still hold the key to our economy today. The towns of the North, Huddersfield among them, are packed with potential, skills and ambition.

The levelling-up agenda of the Tories was never set up to invest in such towns, and it did not make fundamental changes to the way our country is wired. Put simply, its ambitions were too cosmetic. With Labour in government, we are at the start of a decade-long plan to do what the Conservatives couldn't and realise the potential of these places. By the end, we will need to ask not just whether these places look better, but whether the lives of those who call them home have been improved.

That's why I am proud to be part of a Labour government that is currently in the process of setting out a serious and ambitious industrial strategy – one that puts economic growth at the heart of its mission, and crucially, recognises that this growth is also about people. We are already seeing some important steps. The TransPennine upgrade, the country's largest infrastructure project; government funding to develop our local market; investment in the Penistone line. All these go through the heart of my constituency and have been supported by both Labour and Tory governments. However, the public response to the last government's use of levelling up funding to invest in buildings has shown

that this alone will not translate into long-term support if people do not see their lives improve.

Our commitment to rebuilding British industry through a new National Wealth Fund will support investment in advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and digital infrastructure. The planning and infrastructure bill will help unlock the housing and transport projects towns need to thrive, while the English devolution bill will ensure that more power is placed directly in the hands of local leaders. And through the employment rights bill, we are strengthening protections for working people, ensuring that the new jobs we create are secure, fairly paid, and built on dignity and respect.

But this isn't just about fairness – it's about the logic of growth. Towns are home to much of the UK population. They have major employers, key industrial sectors and plenty of innovation. Yet people continue to make lazy, patronising assumptions about our towns.

Take Huddersfield: we have proud traditions in textiles, engineering and manufacturing; we are the birthplace of rugby league, which was founded when on 29 August 1895, 21 clubs met at the George Hotel to agree a breakaway from the Rugby Football Union to enable working-class players to be compensated for wages lost when playing. But we are also a modern, agile local economy. We are ready to lead once more in fields like advanced materials and health and life sciences. One of our engineering firms makes precision parts for use in space; our local hospital is reducing elective wait times though the use of AI in scans; and in our town centre, Huddersfield University's National Health Innovation Campus is leading the way to improve health outcomes and foster innovation in healthcare for the North of England and beyond.

As we continue our drive for growth, matching the ambition of our towns is essential. We recognise just how many people feel that they and the place they call home have been underestimated. We must show that we deliver for these people and places that have too often been ignored. That means demonstrating real change on the ground – making work pay, better public services, streets that feel safe, and a sense that the future will be better than the past. The government's Plan for Change is about making sure that every corner of the country can kickstart growth. It's important that nowhere is left behind in our opportunity mission.

If devolution and metro mayors have shown us anything, it is that place matters. Huddersfield and towns like it built Britain once before. If we're given the tools, the trust, and the backing to succeed, we can do it again. **F**

Harpreet Uppal is the Labour MP for Huddersfield

UNDER THE RADAR

More allergy specialists could help the NHS save both lives and money *— Simone Miles*

"I have never, in all these years, spoken to anybody who had such a complete understanding of allergies and how they interconnect… it was a revelation," one parent told Allergy UK after attending an allergy clinic led by a specialist nurse, organised as part of a pilot scheme in Edinburgh. She was not the only one who felt this way.

While the UK's obesity crisis is widely recognised as a major public health issue, far less attention is given to allergic disease – despite the fact that it affects a similar proportion of the population. One in three people in the UK now live with an allergy, and for many it is a daily, overwhelming challenge. Allergies disrupt education, reduce job opportunities, fuel social isolation, and – in the case of anaphylaxis – can be life-threatening.

The statistics are staggering: hospital admissions for allergic reactions have risen by over 161 per cent in the last 20 years; half of children in the UK are affected by at least one allergic disorder; and among adults with anaphylaxis, 40 per cent suffer post-traumatic stress. However, the NHS has just 40 adult allergy consultants, and a similar number of paediatric specialists – fewer than one for every 250,000 people affected. As a result, for the most part patients must rely on primary care. Yet GPs often lack the training, time or referral pathways to diagnose and manage allergic conditions effectively. Our research shows that only 21 per cent of adults and 43 per cent of children receive their allergy diagnosis in primary care, with many forced to wait 6 to 18 months to see a specialist.

While governments have often stated that integrated care systems (ICSs) are best placed to determine local needs, Allergy UK's 2021 freedom of information request found that only 7 per cent of ICSs systematically collect allergy-specific data. Without reliable data, services cannot be adequately commissioned, perpetuating a postcode lottery in access to allergy care and leaving many vulnerable patients underserved.

The financial cost is equally stark: poorly managed allergies are estimated to cost the NHS £1bn annually, with delays in care leading to worsening symptoms, preventable emergency admissions, and the unnecessary use of expensive treatments.

At Allergy UK, we believe this status quo is unacceptable – and avoidable. In partnership with the University of Edinburgh and NHS Lothian, we piloted a new model: embedding specialist allergy nurses in GP surgeries to provide early diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up support. Over a 30-month period:

- 426 patients were assessed and treated within a nurse-led allergy clinic.
- Patients experienced appointment waits of just 4 to 8 weeks – in stark contrast with the 6 to 18-month delays often faced when referred to NHS secondary allergy services.
- Only 5 per cent of patients required referral to secondary care – without the clinic, healthcare professionals estimated up to 90 per cent would have needed onward referral or received inadequate support.
- 92 per cent of patients adhered to prescribed treatment plans and 82 per cent reported measurable improvements in their allergic conditions.
- 87 per cent of GPs endorsed the permanent integration of specialist allergy roles within primary care – citing reduced patient anxiety, improved clinical outcomes, and alleviated pressure on hospitals as key benefits.

This is exactly the sort of reform the NHS needs: locally delivered, cost-effective, rooted in prevention, and designed to make better use of existing skills within the workforce. It is also practical and achievable. The pilot focused on upskilling trained nurses already working in the system, and the British Society for Allergy and Clinical Immunology (BSACI) has since published a framework for a 'GP with an extended role' in allergy, setting out the

core competencies required for primary care practitioners.

The model has cross-party support. Peers from across the House spoke in favour of the nurse-led approach during a Lords debate last December. The government has since agreed that the pilot aligned with its priorities for the NHS – shifting care into communities, focusing on prevention, and using NHS resources more efficiently to reduce wait times.

We are now calling on the government to roll out a larger national pilot, embedding specialist allergy nurses and dietitians at the primary care level within several integrated care systems (ICSs). This would serve as a critical next step towards full national implementation.

Ministers are currently finalising a 10-year NHS plan with prevention, community care and digital transformation at its core. If those ambitions are to be realised, allergy cannot be left behind. Allergies are a public health crisis hiding in plain sight. Unless we act now, the costs – physical, emotional and financial – will only grow. **F**

Simone Miles is the chief executive of Allergy UK

IN FLUX

The fiscal impact of tighter immigration controls is far from straightforward — *Madeleine Sumption*

Following unusually high levels of migration post-Brexit, UK public discourse once again turned to restricting migration. From late 2023, the Conservative government started to scrutinise care employers more closely, and in 2024 prevented care workers and most international students from bringing partners or children with them. Labour is maintaining these policies, and has now published a white paper proposing further restrictions. It plans to close the care route to overseas recruitment entirely, restrict middle-skilled work migration, raise work-visa salary thresholds by an as-yet-unspecified amount, increase language requirements for many migration categories, and increase the length of time it takes to become a permanent resident from five to up to 10 years for some visa holders.

Some critics argue that politicians are pursuing reductions in migration with no regard to the cost—sometimes pointing to Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) estimates that show higher migration brings a fiscal benefit in the medium term. This is too simplistic. It is unhelpful to lump together all restrictions on migration and say the whole package is either good or bad for the economy. There are several different policies, and they have different effects. This is because many of the economic impacts of migration depend greatly on *who* is migrating.

There are many different ways of assessing the economic impacts of migration policy. For simplicity, we will focus on the implications for the public finances, which are among the easiest to calculate –although still fiendishly difficult. A newly arriving migrant's impact on the exchequer will largely depend on whether they work and how much they earn. High earners will pay a lot more in tax than it costs to provide them with public services and any state benefits, while the opposite will be true for low earners and people who do not work. The same applies to British people, by the way: roughly half of the UK population will present a net fiscal cost to the exchequer over the course of their lifetimes.

The Office for Budget Responsibility assumes that migrants are pretty similar to UK residents of the same age, with similar earnings and employment rates on average. In this past, this has largely been true. However, it does not *have* to be true.

Some restrictions on migration are likely to have positive fiscal impacts. For example, the Home Office estimated that the Conservative government's restrictions on the partners and children of care workers and international students would have a positive fiscal impact over a 10-year period. This is plausible, because children have a negative fiscal impact in the short run, and partners of health and care migrants who are working have below-average earnings.

The closure of the care route to overseas recruitment presents a more complex trade-off. In the short run, overseas recruitment helped employers to find workers despite poor pay and conditions in a largely publicly-funded industry in which it is extremely difficult to raise wages. This will have benefited care users, and might have saved public money in the short term by allowing the government to kick the funding 'can' down the road. But in the long run, admitting workers close to the minimum wage—most of whom would probably not stay in the care sector forever—was likely to present a fiscal cost.

Restrictions on work visas for middle-skilled jobs are likely to have a relatively small fiscal impact. Many people working in such jobs are, unsurprisingly, working for middling wages. Middle-skilled occupations like butchers and chefs also typically do not see large wage growth. The fiscal impact of these workers could be positive or negative, depending on things like whether they bring a partner and whether the partner works. Some also bring broader benefits, such as contributing to homebuilding targets or infrastructure in the case of construction workers. On the other hand, reducing migration in low- and middle-paid jobs may have positive impact in the housing market, since migration has been one factor contributing to the higher cost of housing.

By contrast, it is possible that a further increase in the salary thresholds for graduates will have a negative fiscal impact if employers respond by hiring fewer early-career workers in occupations like IT and engineering. These workers are expected to have a positive direct fiscal impact; they also increase productivity, with broader benefits for the rest of the population.

Meanwhile, plans to increase the length of time people on temporary visas have to wait before getting permanent status would mean migrants pay more in immigration fees. This brings in revenue for the government at the cost of making integration more difficult. If the change applies to highly-skilled migrants and deters some from coming to the UK, it may have a fiscal cost. However, it remains unclear whether a significant share of long-term migrants will be affected, and it is possible the new rules will not apply to high-paid migrants at all.

Perhaps, after the various fiscal impacts of the measures have cancelled each other out, the OBR will turn out to have been justified in its broad-brush approach. But immigration policymakers cannot behave as if each individual restriction is equivalent, regardless of who they apply to. Some types of migration can be cut with minimal fiscal cost, and sometimes even with a fiscal benefit. Others cannot. In the long term, the economic impacts will depend on these details, how they are implemented and how migrants and employers respond—not just the raw numbers. **F**

Dr Madeleine Sumption is the director of the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford

Vibe shift

Davy Russell's shock victory in Hamilton shows that Labour can win in 2026, argues *Katherine Sangster*

Katherine Sangster is the Scottish Labour candidate for Edinburgh Eastern, Musselburgh and Tranent. She is the Fabian Society's national director for Scotland

Since my selection as a candidate for Holyrood in 2026, I have been making the trip west to spend most of my time in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse. This byelection was key to Scottish Labour's fortunes. Just as the Rutherglen byelection shifted the narrative and demonstrated that Scottish Labour could win again, Hamilton had to do the same for the upcoming Holyrood election. The stakes could not have been higher. Early on, we were written off. Pollsters, media commentators and the bookies all predicted Scottish Labour coming in third place.

Anas Sarwar, Davy Russell and the rest of the Labour team simply got their heads down and got on with the job in hand, listening to voters and responding to their concerns. Conversations were longer than usual; voters were, understandably, angry and frustrated. Both Anas and Davy focused their time on these doorstep discussions rather than televised appearances. The campaign combined old-school canvassing with cutting-edge data collection. The result proved that likeability, authenticity and a well organised door-to-door campaign can still win in the era of Trump and TikTok.

After John Swinney spent weeks pushing the idea that Hamilton was a two-horse race between SNP and Reform, the result in the early hours of Friday 6 June completely changed the narrative of Scottish politics. It made clear that Scottish Labour is the only party to beat the SNP, and that with a now-unrivalled ground game, the party that can hold off an insurgent Reform. The general election, and now Hamilton, have demonstrated that a pro-UK, pro-devolution party that is interested in making the country work for the many can win elections in Scotland.

By the time the Scottish parliament elections are held in 11 months' time, the SNP will have been in power for 19 years. It has spent nearly two decades in charge of Scotland's NHS, education system and transport. In that time, little has improved, and much has got worse.

There can be no doubt that the SNP has failed on the objectives it set itself. In 2015, Nicola Sturgeon announced that closing the attainment gap would be her "defining mission" for the 2016-21 session of the Scottish parliament; the most recent exam results show the gap widening even further. In 2017, the SNP set its child poverty reduction targets for 2023, with an interim target of fewer than 18 per cent of children living in relative poverty by 2023/24. Data shows that this target was missed, with 22 per cent, equivalent to 220,000 children, still living in poverty.

It is time to return to the original vision for the Scottish parliament, memorably heralded by Donald Dewar as a place "where men and women from all over Scotland will meet to work together for a future built from the first principles of social justice." The narrative of social media, and some sections of the press, may point to a 'political elite' or a 'Westminster establishment'. Yet those of us working in politics are still part of our communities and accessing the same services as everyone else. We have children in school and elderly parents needing treatment. After two decades of the SNP, we are as scunnered as the people we speak to on the doorstep. My own son was one of the kids who had their marks downgraded because of a half-baked algorithm which graded you on your postcode.

When you are out knocking on doors, the anger and frustration is very real. It is our job as candidates to communicate where the blame lies, and to articulate our vision for a better Scotland. For too long, SNP politicians has blamed their failures on Westminster, without availing themselves of the powers they have thanks to devolution. Like his predecessors, John Swinney's playbook is to do very little whilst focusing all his attention on the performance of the Labour government in Westminster. Until recently, no-one could deny that this was a great campaigning strategy. The SNP are consistently sitting in the mid-thirties in opinion polling, and have never dipped below the 30 per cent mark since the referendum. In Hamilton, though, the SNP did get less than 30 per cent. And John Swinney campaigned on the claim that the SNP was the only party that could hold off Reform ahead of 2026. This argument is looking increasingly shaky.

The SNP's buck-passing is not only a failed electoral strategy. It also represents a commitment not to run the country. We will win in 2026 if we can move the narrative away from a commentary on Keir Starmer and the UK Labour party and on to what the choice is in May 2026: a third decade of the SNP, or a new generation, with new ideas and with a vision for a modern Scotland. **F**

Clean break

Only Labour will deliver on Scotland's green energy potential, writes *Michael Shanks MP*

Michael Shanks is the Labour MP for Rutherglen and the parliamentary under-secretary of state for energy

By the time of the last general election, the UK was grappling with soaring energy costs and global instability under a Tory government that had failed to seize the clean energy opportunity. While the private sector had already recognised the link between clean energy and economic growth, the government's momentum had stalled. Instead of embracing the potential of renewables to tackle climate change and economic decline, the Tories chose to ignite a culture war over net zero – alienating partners and passing up a critical opportunity to lead the way. Now Reform, too, are trying to make net zero a wedge issue.

In contrast, Keir Starmer's pledge to make the UK a clean energy superpower marks a real turning point. It signals a government ready to align climate action with economic growth. That vision is already taking shape. Clean power is now one of eight key sectors in the UK's new industrial strategy. The CBI reports that the net zero economy grew three times faster than the wider economy last year, with over £43bn in private investment pledged – creating thousands of jobs and reaffirming that the UK is open for business.

This shift is especially meaningful for Scotland. With its long coastline, strong winds, and shallow waters, Scotland is uniquely positioned to lead in tidal and wind energy. It boasts a skilled offshore workforce and world-class research institutions. Labour's clean energy mission places Scotland at its heart—unlocking decades of well-paid, skilled jobs and strengthening the UK's energy security by reducing reliance on volatile global markets.

That's why Scotland is now home to Great British Energy. With a CEO appointed, a board established in Aberdeen, and legislation passed in parliament, Labour has swiftly delivered on its promise of a publicly owned energy company – something the SNP pledged nearly a decade ago, but never realised. GB Energy is already investing in projects like solar panels for Scottish schools, with more initiatives on the horizon. These investments will boost energy independence, create jobs, and ensure communities benefit from home-grown power.

And this is just the beginning. From Moray West to Aspen in Inverness, offshore and onshore wind projects are expanding rapidly. Thirty-seven new renewable projects have already been approved under Labour, and the National Wealth Fund has committed £600m to upgrade the transmission grid in Scotland. Every new development brings us closer to our net zero goals and reinforces Labour's commitment to a clean energy future.

Yet, while Scotland is advancing in renewables, it is missing out on the benefits of nuclear energy. In England, progress is being made on Sizewell C, and Great British Nuclear is driving forward small modular reactor development. A new nuclear regulatory taskforce is in place, ending 14 years of Conservative inaction. But in Scotland, nuclear projects have been blocked for nearly two decades by the SNP. In the face of a climate emergency, we must use every tool available to meet our net zero targets – including nuclear.

The same pattern is visible when it comes to energy efficiency. While Labour's Warm Homes Plan is delivering local grants in England and Wales, the Scottish government cut £133m from energy efficiency measures in 2022 and 2023. We are working with the SNP to support initiatives like the Community and Renewable Energy Scheme, which received a significant funding boost in the autumn budget. But ultimately, these are choices the Scottish government must make.

As next year's Scottish elections approach, the SNP's record is under scrutiny. It's a familiar pattern: no plan, no delivery, and now, no accountability. In many ways, the SNP is repeating the same mistakes that led to the Conservatives' downfall – ideological rigidity, missed opportunities, and a failure to harness Scotland's clean energy potential. Meanwhile, Labour is delivering – investing, innovating, and building a future rooted in sustainability and economic growth.

Voters now face a clear choice. A Labour government that champions Scotland's strengths, creates new jobs, and leads the clean energy transition – or an SNP government offering too little, too late. The stakes are high, and the path forward is clear. **F**

Clear blue water

Labour must be bold to win in 2025, writes *Roz Foyer*

Roz Foyer is the general secretary of the Scottish Trade Unions Congress (STUC)

As we look ahead to the 2026 Scottish parliament elections, one truth must guide every progressive voice in Scotland: the people of this country are crying out for hope. Not managed decline. Not empty slogans. Real, transformative hope. That hope must come with a vision: a bold, unapologetic commitment to building a Scotland that works for all, not just the top 1 per cent.

If Scottish Labour aspires to lead the next Scottish government, they must not simply oppose the status quo. They must be the architects of a new one. That means embracing the full powers of the Scottish parliament to make Scotland fairer, more equal and fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

For too long, successive Scottish governments have shirked the radical potential of Holyrood's tax powers. But we no longer have the luxury of time. A recent report from the Scottish Fiscal Commission revealed that Scotland faces a £2.2bn black hole in the finances by 2030. With public services on the brink, wages stagnating and inequality entrenched, we need action, and we need it now. To this end, the STUC has developed a set of tax proposals that could raise an additional £3.7bn per year for Scotland's public services – not by squeezing working families further, but by asking the wealthiest to finally pay their fair share.

Scottish Labour has the opportunity to show the people of Scotland that things can be different

Our proposals are rooted in principle and evidence. We call for a new top rate of tax at 48p for incomes over £75,000, and a 50p rate for earnings above £125,000. We support scrapping the outdated and unfair council tax and replacing it with a modern property tax based on actual property values. In addition, we advocate for meaningful wealth taxes.

This is not about having a nice policy document for our own satisfaction. This is about nurses, teachers and social carers having the resources they need to do their jobs, every child getting the education they deserve, and refusing to let poverty write the destiny of another generation.

Scottish Labour has the opportunity to adopt these measures and show the people of Scotland that things can be different. Not just marginally better, but fundamentally fairer. That's what it means to give people something to believe in. It is a call for a Scotland where wealth and opportunity are shared, where workers' rights are strengthened and where every community feels valued, not abandoned. A Scotland where trade unions are partners in progress, not problems to be managed. One in which investment in public services is seen not as a burden, but as a source of national pride and economic strength.

We will have a fight on our hands. While people queue at foodbanks and wait months for treatment, Reform and their ilk peddle fear and resentment, hoping to fracture communities and distract from the greed and inequality they defend. The only antidote to this poison is hope rooted in social justice. We must meet people's real, everyday anxieties – about housing, wages, care, education – not with broken promises, but with action that make a material difference.

That starts with redistribution. With making sure that Scotland's abundant wealth serves everyone, not just those at the top. It means using tax policy not only to raise revenue but to shape a fairer economy. It means funding services that provide for people in their hour of need. But it also means organising. Building a movement based on hope, solidarity and purpose. That's what Scottish Labour – and all political parties – must offer.

Imagine a government that puts workers first; legislates for stronger collective bargaining; ends exploitative work and invests in green, unionised jobs. One that stops pretending that trickle-down economics ever worked and starts building from the ground up. This is a reality we must fight for. We cannot defeat the far right by echoing their cynicism or chasing their votes. But we can defeat them by giving people something better. A politics of decency, fairness and ambition, and a Scotland that's confident, compassionate and collectively owned.

To those in Scottish Labour shaping the 2026 manifesto: be bold. The people of Scotland don't want half-measures. They want a vision. They want to know that after years of broken promises and political stagnation, someone is fighting for them. It is time to stop the navel-gazing and self-interest. Parties must govern in the collective interest. When they do, we will start to build a better nation. **F**

Past success

A future Labour administration in Holyrood can learn from Sure Start, argues *Paul O'Kane MSP*

Paul O'Kane is a Labour MSP for the West Scotland region

At Scottish Labour conference, you are never far from party members reflecting on the achievements of Labour governments past and present – and looking to learn lessons to inform the achievements of Labour governments yet to come.

One accomplishment that is frequently cited is New Labour's Sure Start. From early learning and childcare to parental employment services, this policy provided a much-needed foundation of support for families. The guiding principle was that if children's health, education and families were prioritised with targeted support, then they could be given a better start in life.

Earlier this year, I had the privilege of visiting children and family centres in Southwark, where the council has maintained Sure Start principles in the face of a decade and a half of austerity. It was inspiring to see the support on offer and the hard work of staff in the centres, assisting some of the most vulnerable in the community. Between examples like Southwark and the wider evidence on Sure Start – which links Sure Start centres with improved outcomes in terms of health and educational development, and resulting savings of millions of pounds for the NHS – it is not surprising to hear the numerous calls to look again at similar initiatives, including here in Scotland.

The SNP government has failed to shift the dial on poverty in Scotland, with one in four children still living in poverty. The latest data released in March this year, which put relative child poverty at 23 per cent, confirmed that the Scottish government had missed its statutory interim target of 18 per cent by a wide margin. Despite welcome interventions such as the Scottish child payment, current action is evidently insufficient.

Serious reform and coordinated thinking has been woefully absent throughout the SNP's time in power. Instead, action has been piecemeal – a pilot here, a phased rollout there – none of it sufficient. It has been government by press release, focused on putting sticking plasters on the symptoms of poverty instead of developing a strategy that targets all the contributing causes of poverty.

Scottish Labour's offer in 2026 should set out a plan to tackle these causes. We already have a good idea of what they are. Too many parents still struggle to access the labour market because of expensive and inadequate childcare; too many families cannot afford good-quality housing; too many families struggle to get their child to go to school, whether because of the learning disruption caused by the pandemic or rising violence in schools. Sustainable progress in reducing child poverty will need policies that targets these underlying issues.

Change has to happen at the level of the community, developed and delivered by local people, but it must be guided and supported at all levels of government. Which is why I announced this February that a Scottish Labour government would provide family network coordinators to give targeted, holistic family support to low-income families who have children living in poverty. The placement of our coordinators would be organised through 'associated school groups' (ASGs), each of which contains one secondary school and a number of associated primary schools. Our goal is to deliver at least two coordinators per ASG in the first two to three years of a Scottish Labour government.

Coordinators can pull together the patchwork of support currently delivered by public services, third sector organisations and community groups. They can put families in touch with the specific help they need, whether that be advice on money or benefits, housing, childcare provision, or parenting and employment support. Crucially, our coordinators will be there to be build relationships with parents and children who find themselves living in, or at risk of living in, poverty. In essence, coordinators will be the lynchpin that brings families and the support they require together. We know this model can work. The community link workers that exist in many GPs across Glasgow, for example, have been successful in helping many adults towards tailored support.

And coordinators are just the start. The larger ambition for a Scottish Labour government is to establish physical spaces that families can go to: family network hubs. We want to learn the lessons of Sure Start, build on the good practice of surviving family centres, and join up available services. Even this will be just one plank of the wider offer from Scottish Labour as part efforts needed to tackle child poverty.

Two decades on from New Labour's drive to tackle child poverty, updated solutions for modern challenges will be needed. Reform must happen across all sectors in a coordinated way that learns from best practice to meet local needs. But those updated solutions can and should be informed by the successes of the past. Sure Start is one of those that it is time to revisit. **F**

Lessons learnt

The SNP has failed Scottish schoolchildren, argues *Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP*

Pam Duncan-Glancy is a Labour MSP for the Glasgow region

The last covid lockdown in Scotland ended around four years ago. The repercussions of the sudden shutdown of schools for our children and education system, however, continue. Post pandemic, there has been a rise in the number of non-attenders and an increase in rates of violence and screen addiction. One in four children now need additional support. These developments have stretched our teachers to breaking point, and negatively impact all children.

During lockdown, we witnessed incredible professionalism from workers in the education service and remarkable resilience from young people. In the Scottish parliament, there was cross-party determination to, in the words of Scotland's leading education expert, Professor Ken Muir, "create a more coherent, flexible and responsive education system that better meets the needs of all current and future learners."

Recently, however, the Scottish government has displayed a distinct lack of ambition. It has brought forward a damp squib of an education bill, which proclaims reform but in practice amounts to a renaming of the Scottish Qualifications Agency and a tweaking of the powers of the education inspectorate. Is this really the best that we can do? In 2025, we are armed with the insights of the OECD; Scotland's international council of education advisers; leading Scottish academics including Professor Louise Hayward, Professor Graham Donaldson, and Professor Mark Priestley; and, crucially, Scotland's teachers.

The Scottish parliament's response has been to propose an astonishing 357 amendments. Scottish Labour has lodged 115 of these, and is supporting others from across the political divide where it is in the interests of Scotland's learners to do so.

At a time when ambitious reform was desperately required to restore trust in Scotland's education system, the Scottish government squandered the opportunity. Nevertheless, it is Scottish Labour's responsibility to do what we can at every opportunity to improve education in Scotland. We are working to rewrite the bill until it is fit for purpose, and if passed, our amendments will strengthen the voices of pupils, parents, and teachers, restore accountability in our education system, and ensure the SQA is well and truly abolished. Never again will our children have their grades marked down based on their postcode by a half-baked algorithm.

A Labour government in Scotland would build a curriculum that excites children and young people while ensuring that by the time they leave school they are equipped with the skills which they need to thrive. In secondary schools, we would set out in guidance that national qualifications – roughly equivalent to GCSEs in England and Wales – can be taken over a longer period, across the school year groups S3 and S4. We will give clear expectations for the number of subject choices, reversing the current narrowing of the curriculum and widening opportunity. Under Labour, there will be no snobbery in qualifications or pathways – we will value them all, and give every young person a digital skills passport to demonstrate to the world what they have achieved.

In Scotland, we have failed to begin work to help young people move successfully from school to high-quality employment. In government, we would give young people a clear pathway from school to jobs in crucial sectors, with access to quality skills and careers advice, through the launch of our 'skills to schools' programme. We would also rebuild the confidence of Scotland's colleges, which are at the heart of our ambitions.

To achieve all this, we need an even more highly skilled and confident workforce of teachers and education practitioners. Our comprehensive workforce plan will ensure that we have the right staff in the right places. We will recognise the role of teachers and college staff, and reduce their workloads; properly value support staff; and maximise the excellent work the third sector does, too. Crucially, we will ensure places on undergraduate teacher training courses are aligned to workforce planning, and fix the problems with the teacher census so we know which teachers we need where – and create a national system for supply, so that teachers can go where they are needed and when.

Scotland's education system was once world class. After 18 years of SNP government, it is now marred by massive inequality between the achievements and attainment of children living in the greatest and least areas of deprivation. Our children, who made the greatest of sacrifices when told to stay home and protect our NHS, are being let down by a government that has run out of ideas. I am determined to work for a Scottish Labour government that would grasp the opportunity to provide a new direction in education from the bottom up; empowering staff and broadening opportunity so that no young person is held back because of their background, in a Scotland whose best days lie ahead of her. F

TIPPING POINT?

Scottish Labour's unexpected victory in the Hamilton, Larkhall & Stonehouse byelection sounds the starting gun on the long campaign for next year's Holyrood election. Confounding the expectations of the commentariat, the victory creates momentum for *Anas Sarwar's* Scottish Labour party in what promises to be the first competitive Scottish election in nearly two decades. On the penultimate weekend of the byelection campaign, *Chris Carter* caught up with Sarwar at his campaign office in Hamilton.

The makeshift office is buzzing with activity as teams of campaigners prepare to canvas for Davy Russell, the candidate. It is unusually balmy – so much so that one staffer welcomes me to 'Costa Del Hamilton'. As nice as the weather is, though, it is probably not quite as sunny as the Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar. He greets each volunteer enthusiastically as they arrive.

Sarwar has now been the leader of the Scottish Labour party for over four years. His career falls into three distinct periods: the gilded ascent – during which, after working as an NHS dentist, he was elected to Westminster at the age of 27 and became deputy leader of Scottish Labour a year later; the sharp reverse – losing his Westminster seat during the political earthquake of 2015, and a failed leadership bid in 2017; and the recovery – when he bounced back and became leader in 2021.

We know a lot about Anas Sarwar the person – the dentist, the dancer, the cheeky chappy – but who is Anas Sarwar the politician? What really gets you up in the morning?

It's interesting that you talk about being a 'cheeky chappy' and being positive and happy. Less so now, but it's funny, often, over the course of the last 15 years, people [have said]: "Oh, the guy's too cheerful, too happy – where's the substance?"

I think that the currency of just being a nice person is underplayed in politics, and that actually, having politicians that just like talking to people is really important. I know far too many politicians who just don't like talking to people, and they're probably in the wrong game.

What gets me up in the morning is this: I look at what's happening in Scotland, and it frightens me, to be honest with you.

I think we are at a tipping point regarding whether we can build a fairer, better Scotland, or whether we're going to continue to go backwards, and that gives me great fear for my young children.

So I wake up every single day determined to build a better Scotland for them and for children right across the country. And that's more than just sloganizing. It's more than just moaning or criticizing or looking elsewhere. It's about looking at what Scotland's potential is, what power it's got, what it can do. And we've just got politicians right now that run this country that have no interest in using the power and responsibility they have to build a better Scotland for my kids and everybody else's kids. That's what I want to change.

And what would the vision of a better Scotland be? What would you like to be better?

The one word I hear most often when I'm out and about chatting to people is they feel scunnered. That might not be a word that people outside of Scotland understand, but it just means that they feel pretty down about it all. And

I think we have got to get Scotland's institutions, public services and economy working again – it's as simple as that.

You packed an awful lot into the 15 years that you've been in elected politics. What have you learned as a leader over the over that time? What have you learned about yourself and what have you learnt about politics?

Well, loads, I could talk to you all day about it. When you come into politics as a 27-year-old… I was a wain, honestly. I was coming in at a time when Labour had been in power all my adult life, and you get caught up, I think, in the political bubble and your own political circle, and thinking everything your own party says is right and everything every other political party says is wrong, and being quite tribal.

And I've often said this before, the two most difficult professional experiences in my life were losing the election in 2015 and losing the leadership election in 2017 but they were probably the two best things to ever happen to me – politically, and, in many ways, personally. Because when you are stripped of ambition, when you are stripped of expectation, it is so liberating. I'm a better politician for it, I'm a better parent for it. I'm not sure my mum and dad would say I'm a better son for it. They may have their own view! But I genuinely feel like I'm a better person and a better politician, because you learn.

No one can pretend my 15 years in politics has been easy. It has been an absolute rollercoaster. We talked about the success last year. That's probably the only real success, if you think about Labour winning, in the entire 15 years. But that's only made me more determined. It's not made me want to walk away. Don't get me wrong, there have been moments when I have thought about it, but it's only made me more determined to do what we've got to do, to get our party in a place where it can win, it can compete, and to get us in a place where we can do positive, good things for Scotland.

I'm really proud of the role we played to elect a UK Labour government. That's the job half done. The next part is electing a Scottish Labour government, then using the vast talent, resources and power that Scotland has to build a better Scotland, to get Scotland working again.

Scottish politics – it's a cliche to say, but it's febrile, its fast-shifting. You're knocking on a huge number of doors. What's your sense of where Scottish politics is now?

I think politics has changed so much, and it's so fast-moving, that if the average commentator, or even the average pollster, looks back at what they were predicting and projecting three years ago, two years ago, one year ago, they've all been proven wrong. If I believed every commentator that said Scottish Labour was dead, or that Scottish Labour had no chance of winning, or that Scottish Labour would be lucky to get eight seats or 15 seats in the general election, I would have packed up and gone home a long time ago.

And actually, the commentators and pollsters have been so wrong, and I'm surprised they're not looking at their record when they're making big, grand projections now about what might happen in the future. But I suppose their job is to report on the snapshot of the day, rather than looking to the future. My job is to look to the future, and that should be the job of every politician, to look to the future and what they can do differently.

You've talked about that before in relation to Gordon Brown – that what makes him great politician is his ability to see where things are going, and then to be there.

But also, I think what makes him a great politician is not just that he looks to the future, but that he keeps an iron rod, or iron spine, of values throughout it all. He's real conviction politician.

Generations change and have different styles, but I'm driven by the same conviction around making things work in Scotland.

And in this constituency, where are politics now?

I think the interesting thing right now is, people are frustrated. I don't think that they think government works. I don't think they think the economy works, or public services. I think they feel as if they're being asked to pay more and more to get less and less in return. They feel as if there is a managed decline happening in our country.

I think layered on top of that, probably partly fed by social media algorithms, there's a sense of unease, a sense of underlying change that feels quite alien to them. And I think that sense of insecurity, that feeling that things don't work, is being played upon by politicians who want to use division and fear to achieve personal power and personal vindication rather than improve our country.

I think the people have decided largely that they think the SNP is doing a bad job and that it's not working. I'm not saying that's true for everybody; I'm sure there's still a core of people, including those that are resolute supporters of independence.

But I think even they, when you speak to them, don't feel as if the government is working for them. So, I think there is now a clear sense in the country that it's not working, and that something needs to change. And I think the big risk we have with the divisive politics of the likes of Reform is that we end up risking a third decade of the SNP.

You've talked about being authentic. What is it about being authentic that can counteract what we're seeing with Reform?

The reality is Nigel Farage is not going to go to the doorstep. He's the kind of politician that wants to showboat and play the game to get the headlines, backed, in many ways, by a media narrative that seems obsessed with him as a personality. But Scotland will see right through him.

I don't care about Nigel Farage, and Nigel Farage doesn't care about Scotland, and we should just be really open about that. Nigel Farage can't be first minister, Kemi Badenoch can't be first minister, and for all they want to criticize our UK Labour government, Keir Starmer is not standing for first minister – he's our prime minister.

He's doing a really important job: turning around 14 years of damage done by the Tories. But the choice for first minister, it's either going to John Swinney or it's going to be me, and I want to demonstrate – with full respect to John Swinney; I'm not pretending everything he's done in the 18 years that he's been in the heart of government has been bad – that we need a different kind of leadership here in Scotland, a new energy, a new generation, with some new solutions.

It would have been difficult, 20 years ago, to imagine a Scottish parliament byelection with so much buy-in from the Westminster contingent. We've all seen the hostility towards the Labour government in Westminster from the media, which seems to be cutting through with people. Could you just tell us a little bit about the dynamics of that relationship between Scottish Labour, Westminster Labour, and the 37 MPs that we send to the Commons?

Look, our 37 Labour MPs recognise that their role is to fight for their communities and fight for Scotland. They aren't there as some kind of protest wing for Scotland, like the SNP MPs, who are sitting in the opposition benches, shouting abuse, shouting slogans and ultimately coming back with nothing. Their job is to get around the table, be in the corridors of power, and influence decisions for the people of Scotland. I think they've done that really, really effectively.

When you look at the ministers from Scotland, they're doing a disproportionately brilliant job. You've got Douglas Alexander, who's leading for us on trade. We've had three really significant trade deals in the last three weeks: a new trade deal with the US, which people said wasn't possible, and that the SNP opposed; a new trade deal with India that people said wasn't possible, and that the SNP opposed; and a new trade deal with the EU, which everybody said wasn't possible, and that the SNP opposed.

You've got Michael Shanks as our GB Energy minister, and you can see the game-changing impact that's

having when you look at the huge challenge of racing towards net zero while protecting the oil and gas sector as much as we can as it transitions away from fossil fuels to a renewable future.

Earlier you mentioned Keir specifically. He is someone that genuinely cares about and understands Scotland, and he is someone that I have not only a political relationship with, but a personal relationship with. He has got a really, really difficult job. He's got loads of things to balance.

But I can honestly say that he knows that I was an integral part of making him prime minister, and he knows that he has to be an integral part of making me first minister. I'm really proud of the role I played in making him prime minister, because I genuinely believe he's a decent whoman who has good values and who wants to deliver a better future for our whole country, including Scotland.

I think it's easy to forget how terrible the inheritance was from Boris Johnson, Suella Braverman, Jacob Rees-Mogg, and all the other people who were the key figures in our politics. That's the mess that a UK Labor government is trying to clear up. But I think you can see that progress now being made: energy bills are finally coming down – we need them to come down further, but it's finally happening. Mortgages that went up £2,000 under Liz Truss are now coming down significantly because of the economic stability provided by UK Labour government. We've got the fastest growing economy in the G7, which analysts didn't predict. We've got a record increase in the living wage. We've got the new deal for working people, and we've got these new trading relationships with the EU, with India, with the US, as well as potentially a deal that's currently been negotiating with the Gulf states. All of these are huge, with massive potential for us here in Scotland and right across the UK.

So, you're starting to see the difference a Labour government is making. And I think looking forward to another year of that, it gives me great confidence that we can win in 2026 – but ultimately, that's up to the people of Scotland. F

Professor Chris Carter is professor in strategy and organization at the University of Edinburgh Business School. This interview has been edited for length and clarity

Strong Labour

The government must confront the threats to our democracy head-on, writes *Jeevun Sandher MP*

Dr Jeevun Sandher is the Labour MP for Loughborough. He previously led the economics team at the New Economics Foundation

Our democracy is facing three existential crises – a living standards crisis, a military crisis, and a climate crisis. People who cannot earn enough are turning away from democracy; Putin wants to destroy democracy in Europe; and a burning planet is fuelling conflicts while making us all poorer. In the next decade, we will either find the strength to save our democracy or we will lose it.

We can meet this moment, make sure everyone can earn enough, protect ourselves from Putin's war, and save the planet for our children and grandchildren. But do so will require a new vision for these more dangerous times: a vision of strength in unity that can guide us and provide a clear narrative at this uncertain moment.

This new vision should be rooted in timeless Labour values. In particular, that *everyone* should be able to live a good life. The vision we use to express these values has always changed to suit the time. In the 1940s, a vision of citizenship, where collective security was granted in return for collective sacrifice. In the 1960s, a vision of modernism, which embraced the technological revolution of the time. In the 1990s, a vision of renewal for both our public realm and our social fabric. In the current decade – the most dangerous in almost a century – a new vision is needed: 'by the strength of our common endeavour'. This is the message we need for these dangerous times: strength derived from our collective power.

The founding principle of every human organisation, be it a family, a company, a club, a movement, or a society, is a variation on this theme: we achieve more, and are more powerful, when we stand together rather than apart. At the level of a nation, strength is built out of our collective purpose, connection, and prosperity. A country where we *all* share the same goals, look out for one another, and where all of us are doing well, is a stronger nation. And cultivating strength is the right response to deal with a precarious present and a dangerous future.

Our opponents' vision is one of weakness founded in division. Their answer to every problem is to blame someone else or tear something down. They capitalise on our crises rather than confront them. They prize one group over the whole community. Their vision of a nation is one where only some do well rather than all, and where the success of one has nothing to do with the contribution of all. Their vision is of weak and divided nation. Ours is of a strong and united one.

From our vision of strength flows the response to each of the crises we face. Strength means taking the bold action that is necessary to save democracy rather than dealing in piecemeal solutions that will not get the job done. We seek a country where everyone can earn enough to build our collective strength; where we defend ourselves and our values; and where we look to the future rather than focusing only on the present.

Confronting our living standards crisis

Many people living in Britain today cannot afford a decent life and see no prospect of ever being able to do so. As a result, they are losing faith in democracy. Our opponents use stagnant living standards as an excuse to find a group to blame, weakening us further. Our vision of strength is one in which everyone can earn enough, strengthening the bonds between us and restoring faith in democracy.

More than one third cannot afford the basics. Two groups, in particular, are struggling – non-graduates and young (often graduate) renters. Non-graduates cannot find decent jobs in our post-industrial economy. Young renters can't afford their own home without inheritance. Both are losing faith in mainstream parties and looking to radical alternatives: Reform for non-graduates and the Greens for young graduate renters. Both sets of voters are also losing faith in democracy itself. They are becoming increasingly angry at a nation, and a political mainstream, that is not providing them with a route to building a decent life.

That anger is leading to internal division. When things aren't going well, we naturally look to blame someone, usually an out-group, to provide a natural and intuitive explanation for what are, in reality, longstanding and complex problems. There will always be people like Farage, but the reason his rhetoric has appeal to people is because things aren't working for them. When people cannot earn enough, division leads to further division.

A strong nation is one where every person can earn enough for a decent life and where every person shares in our collective strength. That will require, firstly, bold action to get bills down, including investing in clean energy, which is over 50 per cent cheaper than natural gas, and investing in childcare, so that couples can both work and have a family. Secondly, the government needs to invest to create good non-graduate jobs outside major cities. Construction and home insulation provide good non-graduate jobs, but we also need to invest in public sector jobs that have non-graduate routes, like nursing and care. Thirdly, to make renters better off, we need to build a lot more new homes and make it easier for people to buy them.

Confronting our military crisis

Peace is built upon strength. By showing that we are willing to defend our values, and that we will stand together to do so, we can prevent conflict. This is the logic of deterrence that the European peace of the past 80 years was built upon. That peace was founded upon nations and people standing together as part of the strongest military alliance in the history of humankind, NATO.

That peace is now under threat. America's commitment to NATO is uncertain, and Putin is attempting to redraw Ukraine's borders by force. He will come back for more once the war in Ukraine ends if he believes that NATO will not stop him. Again, we see the weakness that division breeds.

Preventing a wider war in Europe requires showing strength through unity. It means showing Putin that European NATO would not only defeat him – but defeat him easily. To do this, we need to convert our far greater economic power into more fighting forces than he can. Winning wars is more a matter of economies than tactics. It is the side that can outproduce the other in fighting forces – guns, shells, and now drones – that wins.

To deter Putin, we need both a mindset shift and a production shift. We must first accept that we are in a pre-war situation, and need to prepare accordingly. Then, we must act quickly to build a stronger fighting force immediately while preparing to rapidly scale up in the case of conflict. That means having production lines for drones and munitions ready for when we need them. It means investing in skills like welding, engineering, and plating that we need to produce *materiel*. It means making sure the funds to make these investments are available as soon as possible, including by founding a multilateral defence bank with our allies that can leverage investment into defence.

Strength means facing up to our problems, rather than shirking away. This will help us prevent war.

Confronting our climate crisis

A changing climate is making us poorer at home and fuelling conflicts abroad. Confronting it requires the strength to act as a collective whole to protect future generations and reject the myopia of our opponents. The story of history is not that environmental degradation necessarily destroys nations. It is that weak political leadership allows environmental failure to destroy nations. The Akkadian empire, for example, began to disintegrate in 2220BC as droughts led to crop failures, and then civil wars. Similarly, 2,000 years later, in the Western Roman empire, a changing climate combined with poor political leadership led to food shortages, and the drought-induced Hun invasion helped to push a weak political system into collapse. But a stronger political system in the Eastern European empire survived the environmental shocks.

In our own time, the climate crisis is already here, and we must respond to it. The ten hottest years on record all took place in the last decade. At home, flooding is

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now costing us around £1bn a year, and 40°C heatwaves are killing thousands. Beyond our shores, a burning planet is fuelling conflicts that affect us here at home. The Sahel, a region that stretches across Africa below the Sahara Desert, is sweltering, leading to droughts that are fomenting warfare in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. People are leaving the Sahel in droves and coming to our nation in boats.

Strength means confronting climate change by doing our part to prevent it and dealing with the changes that are already here. It is far cheaper to invest and stop emitting carbon now than to pay to deal with the consequences later. The good news is that investing now will also get energy bills down for good *and* create jobs in green sectors. In the UK we have almost decarbonised our electricity grid. Next, we need to decarbonise transport and our buildings. Crucially, innovations we make here can be sold to help others decarbonise across the world. This is fundamentally about making upfront investments now that will reduce costs for centuries to come.

Strength means confronting climate change by doing our part to prevent it and dealing with the changes that are already here. It is far cheaper to invest and stop emitting carbon now than to pay to deal with the consequences later

Saving democracy through strength

These crises threaten to destroy us. What we do now will determine the future of our democracy. Democracy requires a *demos*. It needs a majority that are willing to stand up for it, rather than search for radical alternatives.

But anger and fear define our times. We hear it at the dinner table, we feel it on our streets, and it is fed to us through our screens. Anger and fear are a natural response to a precarious present and a dangerous future. People are angry that they cannot afford a decent life and see no prospect they will be able to do so. They are scared at the prospect of war in Europe and a burning planet. People feel unable to protect themselves or their families by standing alone. And anger and fear lead people to turn away from the mainstream: of Green and Reform voters, 70 per cent and 80 per cent respectively are angry.

We can see a similar story across Europe. Anger has fuelled the rise of radical parties, putting democracy at risk. As I write this, the hard-right candidate has just won the Polish presidency. Elsewhere, a sequence of near-misses: in Germany, where the AfD are the second-largest party; France, where the National Rally (RN) has made sweeping gains in the national assembly; and Portugal, where the far-right have formed the opposition ahead of the centre-left. Beating the faright narrowly is not a victory. It is a sign of political failure, of weakness, that they can challenge for power.

We need to provide leadership at this moment, and leadership requires vision. A vision that guides us as well as a narrative to bring others with us. I believe it must be a vision of strength in unity and a good life for all. That vision is the right one to meet this moment of crisis and to build a sustainable coalition. The voters that are leaving us for Reform and the Greens are those that cannot afford a good life. A vision of strength that demands that every person can lead a good life is one that can help bring people with us now and to the ballot box in four years' time.

Conclusion

This is a defining moment in our history. We will either rise to meet it, or we will lose our prosperity, our unity, and our democracy. There is no law of economics that says every person must be able to earn enough for a decent life. No law of politics that says that democracies must endure. No law of history that says its arc must bend toward justice. It is for us to make it so. We make it so by applying our timeless values to this moment as we have at every great moment in our history. By responding to today's crises with strength founded in unity – the strength of our common endeavour. **F**

Staying the course

Labour's performance in the 2026 Senedd elections will be determined by Labour administrations at both ends of the M4, writes *Catherine Fookes MP*

Catherine Fookes is the Labour MP for Monmouthshire

A year ago, Labour swept to power in Westminster. In the process, they wiped out every single Tory MP in Wales. It was a sweet victory, built on hope in response to the general feeling that the Tories had destroyed Britain. The UK had been through the disastrous minibudget of Truss, and there was a feeling amongst businesses that we had simply given up being leaders on the world stage. The one word that summed up 99 per cent of doorstep conversations was 'change'. It was the change election.

Here in my seat in Monmouthshire, and in most of our target seats, our main opponents were most definitely the Conservatives. But one year on, the polls tell us that the fight for the Senedd in 2026 will mainly be between Labour and Reform. It is not the Tories we need to win against, as shown by the byelection in Runcorn and the English local election results; it's the surging popularity of populists. Wales is set to become a Reform-Labour battleground.

In these circumstances, what does the Westminster Labour government need to do for Wales ahead of the looming elections?

The single most important thing for the UK government to deliver is hope. We need 'stories not spreadsheets', though of course hope may well come by means of economic prosperity and growth. If we can create more jobs, bring bills down and ensure people have more money to spend at the end of every month, then the job on the doorsteps will be much easier for Welsh Labour.

The UK government has made an excellent start. Wales secured its highest ever settlement, £26bn, at the budget earlier this year; the UK economy is now the fastest growing economy in the G7; interest rates are down; and we have a new EU trade deal which will boost the fortunes of companies across Wales. And thanks to the government's minimum wage increase, around 150,000 people are receiving a pay rise in Wales.

The UK government also recently delivered for Wales on our spending review asks. All Welsh Labour MPs, along with the first minister, Eluned Morgan, have been united in pushing for rail investment to reverse the Tories' catastrophic underfunding of Welsh railways. The Burns Commission produced two fantastic proposals for north and south Wales respectively, and £300m was provided in the spending review to make sure that they happen. The planned stations will connect people on new housing estates to new jobs, reduce congestion and increase productivity and growth. I was also delighted to see that the new Plan for Communities fund will deliver the same level of funding as under the most recent Shared Prosperity Fund.

On industry, the UK government should ensure that Welsh steelmaking will directly benefit from the steel strategy. This will help counter the perception that Port Talbot steel comes second to Scunthorpe's.

Its hugely welcome that coal tip safety has been prioritised by the Labour government in Westminster; this was yet another issue that the Tories were content to let fester. More investment of over £100m was announced, further demonstrating to Welsh people that is worth having Labour administrations at both ends of the M4.

A key challenge for Labour in Wales is the sense of malaise, and mistrust of politicians, that is pushing people towards populists. This is particularly problematic because Labour has been in power in Wales, either in coalition or governing alone, for over 100 years, meaning there is no change card to be played here. The answer is to ensure that Labour policies make a tangible difference to people's lives. NHS waiting lists have gone down for the last three months in Wales thanks to the extra investment from UK Labour and the laser focus of Welsh government on the NHS. We must continue this work and show that we can offer hope.

We must also contrast our vision of the NHS – always free at the point of delivery – with Reform's vision of one where every pensioner will be paying thousands for their healthcare.

Welsh Labour must also ensure it selects excellent new candidates in good time. Finally, it must draw upon its enormous talent pool of activists and campaigners and the deep roots that it has established across Wales. Then, when the time comes, we need to ask the people of Wales a simple question: do you want to throw away all the progress we are making, all the values we hold dear in Wales, the birthplace of the NHS, to risk it all on Reform – a party that wants to charge you to see a doctor? F

Work in progress

The employment rights bill must be underwritten by more fundamental reform, writes *David Coats*

David Coats is honorary professor for the future of work at the University of Leicester

Improving worker's rights was a central part of Labour's 2024 manifesto. The government's flagship employment rights bill, which is progressing quickly through parliament, is the clearest articulation of this vision. Its welcome measures represent a modest reregulation of the UK's world of work, with new protections for those with zero-hours contracts; employment rights from day one of employment; enhanced leave for working parents; protection for workers transferred from the public to the private sector through outsourcing; a new negotiating body to raise employment standards in social care; and reforms to the statutory trade union recognition procedure that, in principle, should make it easier for trade unions to establish robust collective bargaining arrangements. In large measure, the commitments in the pre-election policy document, Labour's New Deal for Working People, will be on the statute book when parliament rises in the summer.

It is a little dispiriting that the public conversation has followed a very familiar course. The bill's enthusiastic supporters present it as transformative; historic wrongs will be righted, exploitative practices eliminated and a fairer labour market created. Opponents of these measures, on the other hand, suggest that they are a charter for job destruction, inconsistent with the government's growth objectives and fundamentally misconceived, albeit well intentioned. What is missing on both sides is a compelling and wide-ranging vision for labour market policy. More ambition is required if present discontents are to be addressed effectively.

Readers of a certain age might reasonably feel they are stuck in a rhetorical doom loop. Similar arguments were deployed during the early period of the Blair government in relation to the national minimum wage and the Employment Relations Act 1999. Throughout the tenure of the Thatcher and Major governments, employment rights were viewed as burdens on business and trade unions as impediments to the efficient functioning of the economy. Harold Wilson's government was deeply divided by the 1969 white paper In Place of Strife, which envisaged a much stronger role for the law in regulating the activities of trade unions. And Edward Heath's Conservative administration experienced similar tribulations following the Industrial Relations Act 1971, which foundered on the rocks of union hostility and employer indifference. Arguments that began sixty years ago – or more – seem far from settled today.

A swift glance at some international comparisons suggests that the cases both for and against are somewhat overcooked. When the legislation comes into force, the UK will continue to have a relatively lightly regulated labour market; there will be no comprehensive labour code, no measures to extend collective agreements across industries and none of the universal rights to information, consultation and agreement that are taken for granted in western Europe. Nor is it possible to sustain the argument that workers' rights are invariably burdens on business that restrict employment growth. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) undertook a comprehensive review of the evidence in 2004 and again in 2018, finding no relationship between the strength of employment protection and the level of unemployment. A number of countries, including the Nordics and the Netherlands, achieved labour market outcomes that were as good as or better than either the UK or the USA while maintaining relatively strong regulation. In other words, the 'burdens on business' argument is an assertion, not a statement of fact, and it is possible to reconcile economic efficiency and social justice. Moreover, the OECD also suggested that the choice for employers was not between collective bargaining and no bargaining, but between collective bargaining and regulation. To be clear, if employers want to avoid statutory intervention, their best response is to negotiate wide-ranging agreements with responsible trade unions. Electorates in democracies have a low tolerance threshold for the worst excesses of capitalism, exemplified by the finding from a recent TUC survey that a majority of Reform voters support the measures in the employment rights bill.

But we are still left with the sterile and ritualised discussion of the last year, a successful escape from which demands a more comprehensive and dispassionate

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assessment, focused on a wider set of questions. How, for example, should the labour market be regulated to achieve sustainable, non-inflationary growth in conditions of full employment? What is the role of institutions like trade unions and employers' associations in delivering that objective? How should the balance be struck between statutory employment protection rights for individuals and the joint regulation of the workplace (and resolution of disputes) by trade unions and employers? The goal must be a shared understanding of the principles of labour market regulation, a consensus about the problems to be solved, a commitment to devising effective solutions, whether statutory or voluntary, and an equal commitment to building institutions that are not themselves continuously in question, which can shoulder the burden of policy implementation.

This does not mean that the parties can never disagree – there is ample scope for disputes about appropriate levels of pay or changes to conditions of employment. It is essential, however, that the parties are not questioning each other's legitimacy or seeking to demonstrate that they are wholly right and the 'other side' wholly wrong. Diplomacy is a better model for industrial relations than trench warfare.

In the past, building a consensus of this kind might have been the responsibility of a royal commission, charged with evaluating the evidence, taking written and oral submissions and making recommendations to achieve the government's declared objectives. Such a patient, deliberative approach might be unpopular today, but it has much to commend it – and the success of the Low Pay Commission and Adair Turner's Pensions Commission both prove that smaller scale initiatives can draw on this method, laying the foundations for a sustainable shift in policy direction. In the absence of a consensus-building exercise focused on creating new labour market institutions, the likelihood is that Labour's legislation will be repealed by a future government of the right or centre-right.

For those who argue this is a counsel of perfection, it is worth recalling the broad agreement that endured for most of the twentieth century about the regulation of the world of work and the role of trade unions. Yes, the system began to break down in the 1960s and yes, it was messy, unstable and sometimes infuriating. But all political parties viewed collective bargaining as a collective good, the inequalities between individual workers and their employers were well understood and unions, rather than being the enemy within, were indispensable institutions in the governance of the nation.

As a first step in the process of reconstruction we might remind ourselves that in many cases the Webbs were right to suggest there is no substitute for the painstaking collection and evaluation of data. That is the foundation on which sustainable, progressive public policy has to be built. Today, labour market policy is framed in response to anecdotes rather than evidence, simply because in many cases the evidence is absent. The most recent Workplace Employment Relations Study was completed in 2011, and while the monthly labour force survey offers useful headline data – on the incidence of work related ill-health, for example – it lacks the detail and texture enabling us to understand how the world of work is changing. The need for more and better research is compelling.

To stimulate further discussion, I would suggest that the principles of efficiency, equity and voice – or productivity, fairness and industrial democracy – should inform policy development in the future. The UK's industrial relations system, if it can be described as such, fails today in relation to each principle. Productivity growth in the UK has been woeful since the financial crisis of 2008, wage growth has been sluggish, bad practice is widespread and the tenets of industrial democracy – to organise, speak up, be heard and negotiate with the employer – are honoured more in the breach than the observance. Fixing the foundations means rebuilding a robust set of labour market institutions for the future. That is the opportunity and the challenge for the next decade. **F**

Restoring trust

Electoral reform is urgent – an independent commission is the best way to get there, writes *Steve Race MP*

Steve Race is the Labour MP for Exeter

Last July, Labour inherited one of the worst legacies left by any government. Over a decade of austerity has left Britain worse off than when the Conservatives took office. Naturally, our first priority was and is to put Britain back on track by stabilising our public finances, securing the highest sustainable growth in the G7, fixing our roads, ending our homelessness and housing crises, cleaning up our waterways and rebuilding our health system. Unlike our predecessors, we know we must do more than promise – we must deliver. This project of renewal will require the government's undivided attention in the years to come. Yet there is a real risk that any progress we make in this parliament is quickly upended – and Westminster's voting system will be the culprit.

In the UK, public trust in politics and politicians is at a record low, and voter turnout is in long-term decline. So far, first past the post has obscured a seismic shift in British politics – one that progressives ignore at their peril. Voters are sick of Westminster politics as usual and are voting for third parties in record numbers. The 2024 general election was the first where four parties won more than 10 percent of the vote each. The combined vote share for both the Conservatives and Labour hit a record low of 58 per cent. As Labour members, this shift should concern us. It is not sustainable for us – or any party – to win power on ever-smaller fragments of the popular vote. In 2024 Labour was right to adopt a ruthless and successful focus on voter efficiency. Yet this also contributed to making 2024 the most disproportionate election on record.

The local elections in May showed that, if anything, these trends have accelerated. Mayors and councillors have been elected on as little as 24 per cent and 18 per cent of the vote respectively. In Exeter, despite winning the highest number of votes across the county council seats that cover our city, we won no councillors. By looking at the social democracies across Europe that we admire, we know that the more disproportionate elections become, the less satisfied the public are with democracy. Put another way: if people do not get what they vote for, they don't trust the system.

This is fuel to the fire for antiestablishment parties to Labour's left and right. With Reform UK capitalising on a crumbling status quo, first past the post puts pressure on the government to make policy with an eye to volatile swing voters in marginal constituencies. But this risks alienating our loyal core voter base, and so accelerating the decline of the two-party vote – in turn resulting in ever-more disproportionate elections and driving greater distrust in democracy. So the cycle continues. In an anti-establishment age, Labour should embrace our historic pragmatism, and refuse to accept the status quo. We must break out of a doom loop that threatens to destabilise British democracy.

In the immediate term, the government is right to deliver on peoples' priorities: austerity has decimated our public services. People need to feel government can work. We need to respond rapidly to renew the social contract, and we need to drive the economic growth to fund it. But in the years to come, recent history both here and elsewhere suggests voter fragmentation is here to stay. We must not risk the progress Labour makes in this parliament by sticking with an increasingly unfair and unpredictable voting system.

Instead, over the medium term, this government should foster the discovery and development of a political structure that can properly reflect changing voter behaviours by establishing a National Commission for Electoral Reform. A generation ago, during Tony Blair's first term, the Jenkins Commission built consensus for change. We now need a modern version of this process. Using the vehicle of a commission would enable the government to focus on delivering on our core priorities, whilst simultaneously dealing with a growing structural threat to British democracy. The government could launch an independent commission, allow it to reach its recommendations over the course of a year or two, and then progress this conversation as it sees fit, without tying its

hands. While Labour members and elected representatives will work hard to build electoral support and win a second term, given the electoral volatility of voters, it is not impossible to see an outcome that results in a hung parliament. This has already happened twice within the last fifteen years, even with FPTP. In these circumstances, Labour would be well-served if we have shaped and led this conversation, rather than being bounced into it by circumstance.

An independent process would also provide much-needed clarity and consensus on a topic of national importance. Electoral reform is too often seen solely through the lens of partisan political benefit, or the defence of a broken status quo by its most recent beneficiaries. Politicians would of course need to be involved in scrutinising such a process, but its recommendations should be based on the national interest: which systems deliver greater stability, greater public satisfaction with democracy, stronger support for change and higher turnout at elections?

There is precedent for such a process. In the 1990s, New Zealand ran its own commissions on constitutional change, paving the way for their parliament to adopt a moderate form of PR. Former sceptics of their new proportional system such as Helen Clark have since become some of its strongest advocates.

By leading the change on democratic reform, the New Zealand Labour party thrived under the new system. Meanwhile, despite the rise of the hard-right everywhere, none of our social democratic sister parties across Europe are crying out for first past the post. That should tell us something.

Labour has a proud track record of establishing fair parliaments in Scotland, Wales and London. All these systems combine the best part of first past the post – its local constituency link – with top-up regional representatives to ensure that every voter is equally empowered. Under the last government, we saw the country backsliding, with the introduction of mandatory voter ID and the removal of the option of more representative voting – in the form of the supplementary vote system – in the mayoral elections. These changes were enacted with no public consultation whatsoever. The government should review whether either of these measures were necessary, or merely political tactics for partisan gain.

Public support for fairer parliaments is at record highs, with multiple long-running polls showing majority public support for proportional representation (PR) in Westminster. Parliament itself is not far behind: in December, the Commons voted in favour of PR for the first time in a landmark free vote. The new all-party parliamentary group for fair elections is now the largest in parliament, with over 150 members. I am delighted that its chair, and most of its members, are Labour MPs and peers. With widespread support for change to Westminster's voting system growing both in and outside Parliament, this issue is not going to go away – and the government has the opportunity to be proactive.

In increasingly uncertain times, one thing is certain: our voting system is not contributing to the trust and stability we need in British politics. Labour has a proud tradition of democratic reform. In the face of those that seek to divide and tear down established democratic norms, we must continue to champion our values as democratic reformers. We are right to deliver on the public's immediate priorities; an independent review of the electoral system will clear the field to do so. We cannot afford to become defenders of a broken status quo, and we should not risk the legacy of this government on an increasingly dysfunctional voting system. First past the post is not sustainable; not for Labour, and not for the country. We must modernise Westminster and launch a National Commission for Electoral Reform. **F**

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Simple regression

We must dismantle hypermasculinity in the armed forces, writes *Allessandra Barrow*

Allessandra Barrow is a parliamentary assistant working on defence policy and a former researcher at the Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, where she contributed to several publications on security and geopolitics. She holds a research master's in Asian studies from Leiden University.

Militaries have long been associated with masculinity in a manner which informs both societal views of maleness and a military's own internal culture. Strength, aggression, and dominance are seen both as inherently masculine qualities and as essential for military success. This is true in many societies, including in Britain.

Yet at a time when the UK military faces escalating threats in Europe and a persistent recruitment and retention crisis, clinging to these anachronistic ideas is a strategic liability. In particular, the perception of the military as a hostile environment for women makes it difficult to recruit them. The UK's target of having women comprise 30 per cent of recruits by 2030 is not an exercise in diversity for its own sake; it is of critical importance to Britain's security. If the armed forces want to be fit for purpose, and if we, the public, want to be protected, it is time we killed the myth that hypermasculinity makes us safer.

In March, the House of Commons defence select committee held an evidence session on the experience of women serving in the British military, questioning for the first time the tri-service chiefs and the new minister for 'veterans and people', Al Carns. The session was tense. The tri-services chiefs found themselves on the defensive as MPs questioned them about bullying and sexual harassment.

The committee's published evidence was grimmer still. Accounts from servicewomen and supporting charities detailed experiences that ranged from ostracism within units to gang rape, often met with indifference or disdain from superiors. These incidents were compounded by systemic issues, such as ill-fitting protective equipment, a lack of access to sanitary products, and military bases without adequate female changing rooms or toilet facilities.

Evidence shows that a military's reputation for gender equality, or lack of it, affects recruitment. When women believe they will be treated fairly, they are more likely to view the military as a viable career. Yet stakeholders seem to be in denial. In 2023, military recruiter Capita claimed: "media reports play a role in compounding the impression that the army is a harder place for women to thrive". This relieves the armed forces of its responsibility to shape its own culture and image. The solution is not better PR and deflecting blame. It is actively challenging the internal culture of hypermasculinity – which negatively affects all personnel – and replacing it with a culture that genuinely values inclusion, professionalism and accountability.

One of the most enduring myths in defence circles is that, whether you like it or not, hypermasculinity is essential for military effectiveness. Take, for example, Nick Carter's justification when serving as chief of defence staff: "Part of the reason we encourage a laddish culture is, ultimately, our soldiers have to [get] close and personal with the enemy." This line of thinking has been used to discourage gender integration, and is one of the reasons why women have been excluded from serving in frontline combat roles. Yet there is little evidence that hypermasculinity makes units more effective, and a large amount of evidence that it makes them more toxic and traumatic work environments, regardless of gender makeup.

Far from undermining combat potency, women may actually make our military a more effective fighting force. A literature review conducted by the MoD's defence, science and technology laboratory during the New Labour years found that "males may benefit from having a female in their team" because women tend to reduce interpersonal competitiveness and often take on emotional labour within groups.

Defence Imagery via Flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0

In short, a culture that undermines psychological wellbeing, erodes trust in the chain of command, and hampers recruitment and retention doesn't make us safer. It makes soldiers, male and female, more vulnerable.

The popular solution is to aim for a 'critical mass' of women, typically set at 30 per cent. General Sir Roly Walker made this argument in the 2025 defence select committee session. Yet this is putting the cart before the horse. The military's reputation for inequality, not to mention bullying and sexual harassment, will make it very difficult to meet this 30 per cent target without broader change. And even if such a ratio is achieved, research into critical mass theory, including in military environments, has highlighted that it often results in backlash against women peers and leaders.

Research has shown that even units with 24 percent women are rarely meaningfully transformed. Instead, women often have to conform to masculine behaviours; end up internalizing gender roles (for example, by believing they are better suited for medical or support roles); and tend to suppress their own voices and ambition. Simply increasing female representation without addressing the underlying cultural and systemic issues around hypermasculinity risks further marginalizing servicewomen.

Likewise, the lifting of the UK's ban on women in frontline combat roles in 2018 has not radically changed outcomes: women still make up just 2.6 per cent of combat troops and 4.4 per cent of combat officers in the army. Progress for women at the highest leadership positions has been sluggish. Since 2024, only one woman has reached the rank of four-star general, and only one has become a three-star air marshal. This is not a coincidence. Leadership is still tied to traditional combat roles – roles women were long excluded from. Women are still often steered into support roles, so their chances of reaching the top are set to remain limited.

Conversations about military culture too often stay within defence circles. But the wider public should care – deeply. Why? Because by failing to protect and support women in its ranks, and thereby failing to retrain servicemembers and recruit at the necessary levels, the armed forces are ultimately failing to protect us. This is not to mention the obvious argument that those who willingly put their lives on the line for the collective deserve so much better than the status quo.

Yes, there are people within the MoD trying to drive change. However, cynicism about the military's propensity to resist reform prevails. Without external pressure, the momentum created by the defence select committee and service women's charities risks stalling.

We are living through a political moment where the principle of equality is under attack. In the US, the history of female and black servicepeople is being actively erased. Across Europe, ideologies that seek to strip away the rights of women and LGBTQ+ people are in the ascendancy. Violently misogynistic voices are widespread online, amplified for their shock value and, increasingly, their mass appeal.

As such, it might be tempting to explore a tactical retreat, or conclude that culture and inclusivity initiatives are frivolous in the face of the military threat we face in Europe. But, to put it bluntly: we are not Russia. The UK is a democracy with a professional, all-volunteer force built on a long-term investment in highly trained personnel – not a conscript army where troops can be treated as expendable cannon fodder.

Ending hypermasculinity in the armed forces isn't about political correctness. It's about operational strength. It's about safety. And it's about justice. Now is the time for the public, politicians, and military leaders to demand a culture that reflects the values the UK claims to fight for. **F**

Lessons learnt

Labour's first steps on education are welcome – and deliberately gradualist, writes *Chris Harris*

Chris Harris is publications and media coordinator for the Fabian Education Policy Group

For a bill that aims to remove barriers to opportunity, which strengthens safeguarding for children, improves multi-agency working and delivers breakfast clubs for all primary children, Labour's children's wellbeing and schools bills has met with a disappointing reaction.

Instead of focusing on the totality of the bill and how children will be supported, commentators, backed by media cheerleaders, fulminate over Bridget Phillipson's desire to create a renewed national curriculum that – fittingly, for a *national curriculum* – all schools will follow. 'Britain's strictest headteacher', Katherine Birbalsingh, calls her a Marxist because she wants all children to be taught by somebody qualified, and because she expects academy schools teach in line with universal standards. The ex-Ofsted chief, Amanda Spielman, claims that Phillipson is curtailing the 'autonomy' of schools compared to the halcyon days of Michael Gove's 'success' (sic). Apparently, Phillipson has been 'captured by the unions' because she speaks to them and has agreed to action the independent pay body's proposals.

Amid this maelstrom of anger and misinformation, some colleagues on the left are worried, too. Professor Becky Francis's recently published interim report on the review of the curriculum is not seen as radical enough. There is also understandable unhappiness with the Ofsted framework proposals: the proposed process remains a compliance agenda characterised by top-down control, instead of an accountability process focused on school improvement partnerships, trust, and quality assurance. Department for Education (DfE) policy more generally is seen by some on the left as not radical enough, lacking in vision, too busy appeasing multi-academy trust heads and tinkering with a system that urgently needs changing.

So unfortunately, the reaction to the children's wellbeing and schools bill has largely ignored the substance of the legislation – particularly with regard to vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The use of a 'single unique identifier' (SUI) to improve multi-agency information sharing where there are concerns about a child's welfare is a timely one, welcomed by many agencies including Adoption UK. Local authorities will now have the power to direct all schools (including academies) to admit looked-after children who are looking for a school place: this requirement promotes fairness and the support of vulnerable children.

Requiring the register of children not in school (CNIS) to include home educated children and those in flexi-schooling or alternative provision improves safeguarding and student entitlements. The new rules on home education, particularly for children who are educated at a special school or are subject to child protection investigations, defend children from low quality provision. The scheme for improving the quality of kinship care, as well as new protections for looked-after children and care leavers up to the age of 25, are progressive and timely.

The perceived difficulties of the bill largely concern how greater power for LA's will fit and work within the interface of schools who have had considerable autonomy in creating their own rule book in these areas.

So how do we view the work of DfE and Phillipson's team so far? Levelling VAT on private school fees was brave. The breakfast clubs for all primary schools; the curbing of academy opt-outs for the curriculum, teachers' pay and admissions; and the limiting of branded items of

school uniform are much needed actions. The expansion of free school meals to include all children in households receiving universal credit has the potential to lift children out of poverty. The significant money for the schools rebuilding programme announced in the spending review is essential and well-timed. All these measures, we could argue, are a good start in making our fractured system more cohesive, which could lay the groundwork for even more progressive reforms – on SEND provision, for instance.

From National Education Union general secretary Daniel Kebede to Sir Michael Wilshaw, formerly of Ofsted, colleagues are respectful of Phillipson's genuine commitment to inclusion and the eradication of disadvantage born of her own background and experience. This focus is strongly reflected in the bill. Choosing Becky Francis to head the curriculum and assessment review – who in her role as the CEO of the Education Endowment Foundation has been focused on breaking the link between family income and educational achievement – was a sensible best fit with what the government is trying to achieve.

Instructing Ofsted to create proposals for a new framework, then offering it to general consultation, was a risk-averse one. Yet if ministers had dared to float a 'dilution' of the sacred inspection regime themselves, it would have laid the ground for feverish right wing attack lines around 'rigour' and 'standards' and more misleading media froth. However, eventually, we will have to move further away from the status quo.

Graham Donaldson, the architect of the Welsh and Scottish curriculums, spoke to the Fabian education policy group recently. He said that delivering a step change in the English system, with its many providers and types of schools, was a particularly challenging task. In addition, the 'improvement trap' – where stakeholders see 'success' mainly in terms of metrics and marginal gains – may impede more progressive approaches to the curriculum.

The elephant in the room curtailing a more radical policy agenda is surely the media. The right-wing media has sought to cultivate derision and seem hellbent on disparaging anything the new government proposes

The elephant in the room curtailing a more radical policy agenda is surely the media. The right-wing media has sought to cultivate derision and seem hellbent on disparaging anything the new government proposes. Phillipson has produced 'a war on schools' and she is 'destroying Britain's education system' (The Spectator); the bill is 'an abuse of state power' (Telegraph); Becky Francis is 'lauded' in 'loftiest left-wing circles' and 'specialises in 'equality and gender issues' so she's pejoratively 'woke' (Andrew Pierce). Katherine Birbalsingh has received more media coverage during this period than Phillipson and the other 99.9 per cent of head teachers put together. This serves to create the impression that her entirely negative response to the bill is the 'go to' wisdom, creating more hostility as other outlets and social media follow suit.

Early mistakes by the new government have been made, of course, but the children's wellbeing and schools bill is not one of them. In the current climate, it is probably better for education policy to be nuanced and gradualistic. It is only a first step, to be sure – but a step in the right direction. **F**

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Steady state

Reform of British society must be built on values and vision, argues *Stephen Beer*

Stephen Beer writes on economic policy based on a career in responsible investment management spanning three decades. He is a former Labour parliamentary candidate and former constituency chair. This article represents his personal opinion.

Labour approached the one-year anniversary of its election victory with frustration. Elected on an agenda of national renewal in July last year, by the time of the spring statement, for all its initial achievements, the government was left trying to understand why it had not made more progress on the fundamental reforms required to deliver the UK from the legacy Labour inherited. More recently, the June spending review took place against the backdrop of criticism that the government was cutting spending while details of reforms had still yet to be outlined.

Meanwhile, the rest of the world has not stood still. President Trump wasted little time in enacting his own reform agenda, focusing on the activities of the US federal government, and announced tariff increases, suspensions, and other changes as he attempted to shift the terms of trade. Watching Trump's activity, the prime minister could be forgiven if at times he felt some "implementation envy".

Widespread reform of the economy, public sector, and politics in the UK is certainly required. The shortfall is considerable in pretty much every area where the public expects to be served by the state. The NHS, for example, is struggling, and still waiting for long-promised social care reform. Social security does not achieve its purpose, even while costs rise. Our defence ministry wastes money on kit that does not work properly, yet we still lack sufficient missiles to fight a war. And the armed forces have only just caught up with the need for a tactical and strategic reboot following the Russian invasion of Ukraine – the 2014 invasion, that is.

Our institutions have become infused with an infectious institutional incapability. The result is malaise and a lack of purpose. We can see the effects in the form of scandals which take years to resolve, or which are painful repeats of past lessons unlearnt. The "meta-scandal" is that the incapability is so widespread that it is often met with a collective resigned shrug rather than outrage. That is dangerous.

Labour is finding it difficult to change things. Accounts of the last Labour government recount similar frustrations. In his biography of Tony Blair, Anthony Seldon writes: "On coming to office, New Labour quickly enacted the specific proposals that had been worked out in opposition. It soon became clear, however, that Blair had failed to work through his own thinking for implementing reform elsewhere, and had placed too much blind faith in others. With his efforts focused so heavily on winning the election, too little time had been given to the challenges of government." This, presumably, is one part of the New Labour playbook the current government has not been intending to replicate. Two years into his first term, Tony Blair gave an infamous speech about the "scars on my back" from trying to reform the public sector. It took Keir Starmer less than six months before he was complaining about civil service lethargy.

Of course, reform is difficult. Effective reform often represents a fundamental change to the way government does things. Even large private sector companies find change management a challenge, and usually they are not responsible for services that are so critical to people's future, wellbeing, and even survival. These are all reasons why the Conservatives avoided the necessary and difficult decisions for so many years. Boldness is required – just as we have already seen from Labour on planning rules, for example.

The case for reform must be built on values and vision. This is what Patrick Diamond and I argue in Power and Prosperity, a Fabian Society pamphlet published in September last year. In other words, any reform must be part of a practical, compelling, and optimistic story about the nation's future. That story should be based on ethical socialist values which celebrate the individual flourishing in community.

A narrative with a values foundation does more than help sell reforms; it determines what those reforms should

be by giving ministers and advisers a guide to action. It also helps to prevent policy based on expediency, especially when time is short. It might be expedient, for example, to encourage a regulator to shift emphasis or change focus; but any such decision should be in line with an overall vision and a coherent narrative.

Get values and change the wrong way round, and the result will often be ministers handwringing over difficult decisions that cannot be adequately explained to voters. Labour was unable to explain why it chose to cut winter fuel payments to pensioners, nor later why it was partially reversing the cut (nor initially who would benefit and when). Similarly, social security spending cuts were not linked to comprehensive changes to help people live better lives.

Worse, if you pass up the chance to frame the debate, you will often find yourself losing battles in someone else's framing. Already, ministers and MPs risk slipping into ready-made framings from the right wing of politics, from which they may struggle to escape.

Change will require funding. This is a key challenge for Labour, because taxation is already at historic highs, and the economy is in a malaise of its own, as the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) regularly highlights. Productivity is far too low, and not expected to significantly increase, leading to low GDP growth and hence limited resources. Funding pressures are exacerbated by the overdue, and still inadequate and indeterminate, commitment to increase defence spending.

The government's fiscal rules – implicitly motivated by a concern about market reactions to government policy, especially after the Truss administration – are serious constraints. The absence of growth also carries market risks for governments. This is why, in Power and Prosperity, we wrote that action should begin immediately and that innovations previously dismissed, such as a land tax, and hypothecated taxes to build support for key spending, need to be considered alongside investment and promotion of a dynamic market economy. Citizens should be given stakes in the outcomes of successful reforms. There is a very real danger that we lose the next election, watch someone else take bold decisions, and hear ourselves echo the famous Fabian, Sidney Webb, after Britain left the gold standard: "no one told us we could do that".

The key lesson from history is that major reforms require cabinet-level responsibility and ongoing prime ministerial attention. They require decisions, based on priorities, which are in turn based on values. The first world war "shell crisis" required a new department and a powerful minister – David Lloyd George. Even then, it was necessary for the prime minister to intervene. We could do with a similar such ministry for defence procurement today. Across the government, ministers should have the power to convene, direct, and recruit from anywhere in government or beyond, being clear what they want to achieve and being directly responsible for the results.

Reform requires action. Reviews represent delay, can suggest an absence of preparation, and compound dissatisfaction. A case study is the social care review, which was asked to work on the basis that initial reforms would be in place by 2036 at the earliest. When reviews are required, actions should be taken which signal the direction of travel and deliver a taste of the changes to come. This is where a values and vision based starting point is so valuable: individual policies, reviews, and reforms sit in the same values-based context.

Wholesale changes to the way government takes and executes decisions are needed. Recent events have made clear that economic reform is also necessary today to make significant progress, as outlined in Power and Prosperity. Speed is important, and approaching reform in a structured way, starting with values and vision, is essential to enable the UK to continue being a great country achieving great things in which its citizens can flourish – and to enable Labour to win a second term to continue the work. **F**

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Road to recovery

The government is giving local authorities the tools they need to make a difference, writes *Bev Craig*

Bev is the leader of Manchester city council. First elected as a councillor in 2011, Bev is a vice-chair of the national Local Government Association and leader of the association's Labour group. As a deputy mayor for the Greater Manchester combined authority, she leads on the economy, business, and international portfolio.

When you vote for change, you want to see it – and quickly. Collectively, at all levels of government, the impetus to deliver sustained improvement has never been greater.

The government's inheritance after 14 years of decline – decimated public services, economic stagnation, declining living standards and life chances, and the weakening of our social contract across the country – means the government's bandwidth will be stretched like never before. Long-term strategy that sets our country on the right course must be fused with demonstrable delivery to keep trust and fend off populism from left and right.

As local leaders, the ability to marshal a long-term plan to rebuild a city's economy, create jobs and homes, and tackle poverty, while at the same time contending with the practical and often literal pavement politics of fly tipping and potholes, is our daily reality.

Crucially, though, how you explain your purpose and achievements matters. Take economic growth, for example. Manchester's story is often cited: a declining post-industrial city has, over the last decade, transformed into the fastest growing city in the UK, with an average growth rate of 3.1 per cent; flourishing life sciences, professional and financial services sectors, and thriving digital, tech, and advanced material industries. Over the course of 20 years, the skills base underwent a seismic shift, from 25 per cent of all working age adults having no formal skills or qualifications to less than 6 per cent. Yet we still face some of the highest levels of child poverty in the country: an important lesson in the impossibility of separating economic and social policy.

An economic journey two decades in the making, supercharged through devolution, maintained broad electoral support throughout (Manchester Labour holds 87 of 96 seats on Manchester City Council). Not because we promised economic growth, but because we harnessed civic pride and focused on the practical benefits of growth – better jobs and more opportunities for children, good homes, more money for local services and clean, green and thriving neighbourhoods. Hope for tomorrow, with incremental progress today.

People's perceptions of success are shaped when they step outside their front door. Is there a vibrant local high street and high quality local services, parks, roads, and public transport? Do they feel safe? Is there enough for their children to do? In other words, people ask themselves: is my local area on the up, or does it feel in decline?

In local government, we are challenged with demonstrating the great strides a Labour government is making to improve everyday life. We are rising to the challenge. After the decimation of local government since 2010, when Labour councils – especially northern towns and cities with high poverty rates – were worst hit, it will take a long rebuild to address the current £6bn blackhole. It is not only about local government funding. The previous government's refusal to grip social care, the spiralling chaos in the special educational needs (SEND) system, and the housing crisis that sees councils in London spend £4m per day on temporary accommodation left us all exposed.

That's why it was so important to see the start of a local government rebuild in the government's spending review and subsequent fair funding consultation. It is heartening to see commitments to tackle the crisis of social care and SEND, and the £39bn affordable homes programme – the biggest cash injection into social and affordable housing in 50 years – will facilitate growth and tackle rises in homelessness in the process. The transformation of the household support fund into a multi-year crisis and resilience fund; free school meals for over 500,000 more children; new funding to increase the supply of good-quality temporary accommodation; and the extension of the warm homes plan will have an immediate impact in terms of poverty reduction. The industrial strategy, infrastructure strategy and transport investment are much needed tools for local leaders like me to create stronger local economies.

To radically improve our neighbourhoods, towns and cities means putting place first, and a reset relationship between national and local, recognising that mayoral combined authorities must be underpinned by well-resourced, capable local councils to succeed. Change will require a reformed Whitehall view of how silos come together in place, and a new level of trust and accountability to deliver placed on our shoulders.

Turning combined authorities into 'mini-Whitehalls' won't work. We must focus on delivering change locally, improving neighbourhoods, building homes, and fostering strong local economies – practical, everyday change on your doorstep. Labour councils are desperate to deliver that change as equal partners – not just to win elections, but to change lives. **F**

Lasting influence

Fabianism helped shape the Sri Lankan labour and independence movements, writes *Uditha Devapriya*

Uditha Devapriya is a researcher, writer, and foreign policy and political analyst from Sri Lanka who writes for various publications

In 1829, the crown colony of Ceylon was visited by two distinguished civil servants. Tasked by the British government with investigating the state of the colony and the future of its administration, they came up with a set of sweeping reforms that would shape the political structure of the country over the next century. Known as the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission after its two authors, the document has since been ranked among the most important set of reforms in the British Empire.

The commission laid the blueprint for the further colonisation of Ceylon. It gave fresh impetus to the plantation economy which the British government had pioneered in the early 19th century, and recommended the espousal of Western values at all levels of Ceylonese society. Over the next few years, the government promoted English education, encouraged Christian missionaries, and undermined traditional institutions. These changes provoked resistance, particularly among the traditional elite, culminating in a brutally-supressed rebellion in 1848. However, they also inadvertently led to the rise of an articulate, Western-educated elite, which became instrumental in advocating for reform.

As the historian Kumari Jayawardena has argued, resistance to colonialism in Ceylon took on two forms over two phases: a cultural and religious revival from the 1880s to 1920, and calls for political and constitutional reform after 1920.

While scholars have closely examined the growth of anticolonial resistance during these periods, not much attention has been paid to how developments in Britain shaped these movements. It was in the late 19th century that labour unrest in Britain led to the rise of radical politics, and political radicalism, in British society. Three years before the 1848 rebellion in Ceylon, Engels published The Conditions of the Working Classes, which laid bare the situation of the English proletariat. Barely 20 years after, the Trades Union Congress was formed in Manchester.

Though largely unacknowledged, one scion of this radical movement, the Fabian Society, played a significant role in developments in Ceylon. In the late 19th century, opposition to colonialism in Ceylon typically took the form of confrontations with Christian missionaries and an upsurge in indigenous revivalist movements, be they Buddhist, Hindu, or Muslim. The Fabian Society had yet to seep into colonial societies during this period, and so had little direct impact at this stage. Nevertheless, neglecting the indirect influence of radical British politics essentialises the trajectory of anticolonial struggles and overlooks the common ground which nationalists in colonial societies sought with radical progressives in the metropole. A key example is the Buddhist revival in late 19th century Ceylon. Sparked by open debates between Buddhist monks and evangelical missionaries, the revival took on a new lease of life with the entry of Western rationalists and radicals, prominently the Theosophical Society. Among the most progressive and articulate of these figures, who fought for the cause of Buddhists in Sri Lanka, was Annie Besant, the British radical who had, in 1885, joined the Fabian Society, although her later immersion in Theosophy led her to renounce her former political affiliations.

The society made its most substantial contribution when its members held influential positions in the Colonial Office during the second MacDonald government. In 1931, the British government enacted its most radical set of reforms with advent of the Donoughmore Constitution. For the first time in a British colony, the government granted the vote to every citizen. Immensely progressive for its time, it set the benchmark for the many reform processes which would follow.

The Donoughmore Commission, which had authored the Constitution, was headed by four parliamentarians, including two leading members of the Fabian Society: Sydney Webb, secretary of state for the colonies, and Drummond Shiels, her fellow minister. To appreciate the ambition of the Donoughmore Constitution, one must remember that this was a period when few within Ceylon, even the most anti-imperialist, envisioned a Ceylon outside of the British Empire. Though certain nationalists made the call for *swaraj* (self-government), it would not be until much later, in the 1930s, that a radical left calling for complete independence would emerge. Against this backdrop, the labour movement in Ceylon benefited from interactions with the metropole. The most important development in this regard was the founding of the Ceylon Labour party in 1928 by the trade unionist AE Gunasinha. Revered today as the father of the labour movement in Sri

Lanka, Gunasinha had led a series of strikes in the as the head of the Ceylon Labour Union.

The British Labour party, along with key members of the Fabian Society, responded positively to Gunasinha and his movement. This did not go unnoticed in Ceylon: as Kumari Jayawardena has observed, the British Labour party was regarded by nationalist and anti-colonial elements in British Ceylon "as the only element in British political life which was sympathetic to their demands." Drummond Shiels, for one, was friends with Gunasinha, and went so far as to advise him on political tactics.

In 1927, when Ramsay MacDonald was elected as prime minister, Gunasinha travelled to Britain. There he met members of the Trades Union Congress. As Ceylon's delegate for the Commonwealth Labour conference the following year, he found common ground with activists from such countries as South Africa and Palestine. This was to profoundly influence his political activities upon his return to Ceylon.

Gunasinha's brand of militant nationalism and labour activism, however, was to meet its end with the formation of new leftwing parties in the 1930s. The most significant of these, the Lanka Sama Samaja party, founded in 1935, signalled a rupture with not just elite politics but Gunasinha's activism by calling for complete independence from the British empire.

Yet many of the new leftwing activists had themselves been educated in British universities, including the London School of Economics. Though critical of Gunasinha's tactics, they were no less influenced by the radical movements they encountered in the metropole. And the imprint of British parliamentary politics, the British Labour party, and the Fabian Society survived these ruptures. The Donoughmore Constitution, and the Soulbury Constitution which followed it in 1947, a year before Ceylon's independence, reflected the democratic socialist ideals that underlay these movements, particularly in their framing of the state as a dispenser of social welfare.

The combination of militant nationalism, trade unionism, and socialism came to the fore with the election in 1956 of SWRD Bandaranaike and his Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which preached the gospel of state-led industrialisation, nationalisation, and patronage of indigenous cultural and artistic forms. As James Jupp put it in 1978 – six years after Ceylon renounced the British crown and became a republic – this ideology was "populist, socialist, democratic, and nationalist." It owed much to the tenets of Fabianism.

How, then, to evaluate the influence that Fabianism exerted on British Ceylon? On the one hand, it bequeathed to two generations of left-wing leaders – from the early 20th century to the post-colonial period – the ideals they needed to take the mantle of anticolonialism forward. On the other hand, it failed to operate beyond the parliamentary system at a time when social forces were clamouring for radical change of the sort that the parliamentary model may not have been able to deliver. This tension between the ideals of parliamentary democracy and the rumblings of extra-parliamentary resistance continues to assail Sri Lankan society to this day. While the gradualist tactics of the Labour party and Fabian Society helped resolve this dichotomy in the early 20th century, it has become difficult, even in 'Asia's oldest democracy' – a distinctly Fabian contribution – to resolve it today. **F**

Noticeboard

FABIAN SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Ahead of the Fabian Society's annual general meeting (date and venue tbc), any full member of the society or a local Fabian society may submit a motion for the AGM by 8 September 2025. Motions will be published online and in the autumn issue of the Fabian Review and amendments will be invited with a deadline of 13 October 2025. For more information contact membership@fabians.org.uk.

FABIAN SOCIETY EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE ELECTION 2023

The Fabian Society is proud to be a democratically governed member-led organisation. Every two years our executive committee is elected by our membership to direct the work of the society and to represent members' interests.

NOTICE OF ELECTION

The executive committee ballot will take place between 15 September and 20 October 2025.

Access to the online ballot will be issued by email. If you are receiving emails from us now, you do not need to take any action. If you are not receiving our weekly Fabian News email, please register an email address with us before 6 September.

CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Members of the society are invited to nominate themselves for election to the executive committee. We strongly encourage all members to consider standing. Nominations should be sent to membership@fabians.org.uk. Please write the position nominated for in the subject line of the email.

Nominees should submit a statement in support of their nomination, including information about themselves and their activities within the society of not more than 70 words. The closing date for nominations is 9am on 15 August.

Nominations are invited for:

- Six ordinary members
- Four Westminster parliamentarians
- One elected politician from Scotland
- One elected politician from Wales
- One elected politician from English regional government
- One local government convenor (who shall be an elected councillor)
- One local Fabian Societies convenor
- One honorary treasurer

Candidates for the position of local Fabian Societies convenor must be nominated by a paid-up local Fabian Society. All other positions are by self-nomination.

At least two of the six ordinary members must be under the age of 27 on the date of the AGM. You need to have been a member of the society before 17 May 2025 to be eligible to stand and vote in the elections.

YOUNG FABIAN AND FABIAN WOMEN'S NETWORK ELECTIONS

The Young Fabians and Fabian Women's Network are also holding elections for their executives. For full details see www.youngfabians.org.uk and www.fabianwomen.org.uk.

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:
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CENTRAL LONDON
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Contact Jonathan Theobald:
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SOUTH TYNESIDE
Contact Paul Freeman:
southtynesidefabians@gmail.com

TONBRIDGE AND TUNBRIDGE WELLS FABIANS
Meetings on 3rd Friday of each month from autumn through to spring at 8 pm, normally at Southborough Civic Centre. Contact Martin Clay:
fabiansttw@btinternet.com

YORK
Contact Mary Cannon:
yorkfabiansociety@gmail.com

THE FABIAN QUIZ

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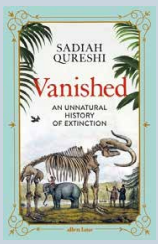

With mutually assured destruction firmly back on the agenda, Sadiah Qureshi's new book, which explores the concept of 'extinction', is looking increasingly prescient.

As Qureshi highlights, the idea that a species of animal could 'go extinct' is a relatively new one, at least in Europe – where, until the 18th century, the standard view was that animals were instances of God's perfect design. It was only as the bones of ancient megafauna were subjected to scientific scrutiny that the sheer volume of extinct animals became apparent. (We know today that over 90 per cent of animal species are extinct.)

Quickly, however, this scientific progress was used to provide a framework for unspeakable crimes, including genocidal massacres of Aboriginal Australians – who were, in the minds of many Europeans, doomed to extinction. With one senior Israeli politician referring to "human animals" in Palestine, the lessons of this period would seem to remain unlearned.

Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:
Charles Darwin's half-cousin was a key founder of the eugenics movement. He also developed the concept of 'correlation' in statistics. What was his name?

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

ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 15 AUGUST 2025.

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AISPA, Anglo-Italian Society for the Protection of Animals

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