**FABIAN REVIEW**

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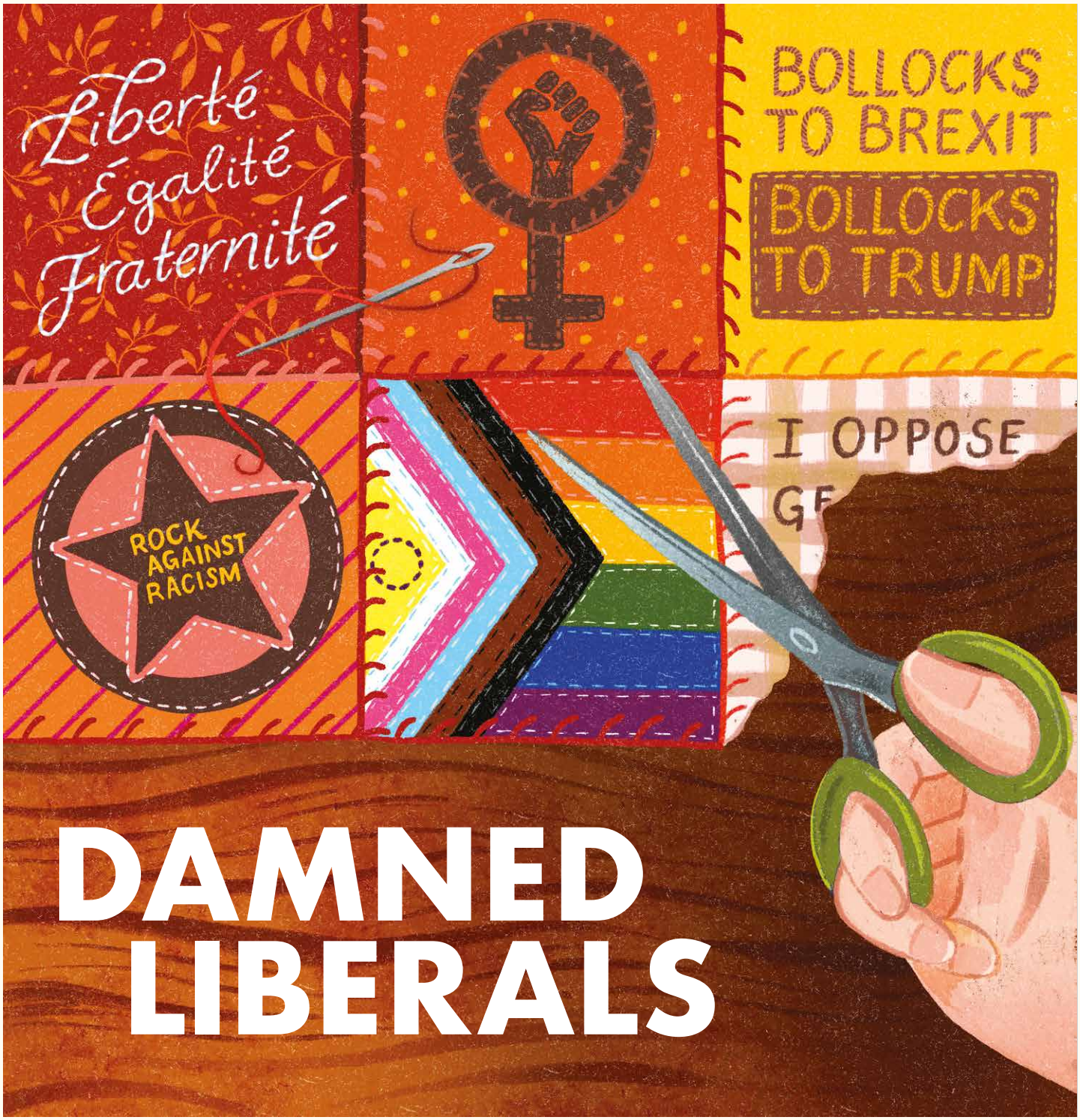


# DAMNED LIBERALS

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# FABIAN REVIEW

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FABIAN SOCIETY

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

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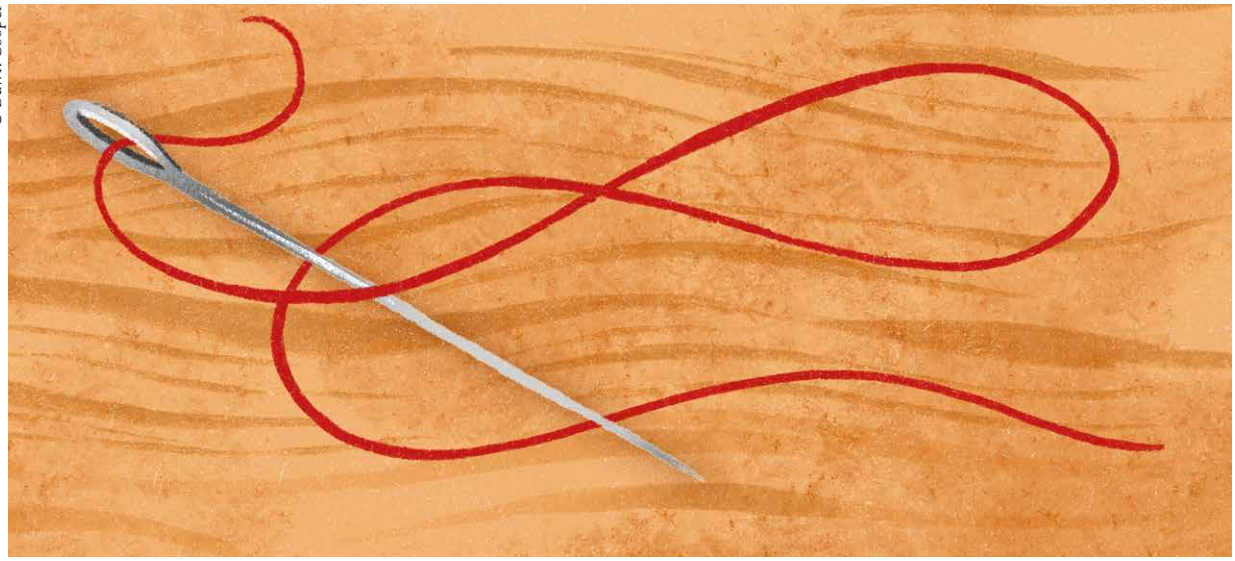




# Stronger together

Conference – along with a deputy leadership election – offers the opportunity to refresh and renew, writes *Joe Dromey*

Many of us will have been very sad to see Angela Rayner step down as deputy prime minister. Rayner played a crucial role in Labour's long hard road to recovery. Working closely with Keir Starmer, she helped take us from our worse defeat in almost a century to a landslide victory last year.

She was the driving force behind Labour's plans to strengthen employment rights. She also led our work to tackle insecurity and poor standards in the private rented sector, and pioneered our efforts to build the homes we need to tackle the housing crisis. These are some of the most transformative – and indeed popular – parts of Labour's programme, and they must continue.

As a working-class woman, Rayner was constantly underestimated, and she faced a much greater level of scrutiny and hostility than most politicians. But because of her background, and because she constantly confounded her critics with both her talent and dedication, she was an inspiration to so many others in the labour movement. Rayner was crucial in putting class firmly back at the heart of Labour's agenda, where it belongs. And no matter how high she rose, she never forgot where she was from and who she was fighting for.

Rayner's departure means that we will be electing a new deputy leader. Some in the party see this as an unwelcome distraction. Some in the right-wing press have salivated over the prospect of a 'divisive' contest in which Labour will 'tear itself apart'. Neither need be the case. There is nothing to fear from debate and discussion within the Labour party and the wider movement. Indeed, as Fabians, we know that engaging with, exploring, and exchanging ideas is one of our great strengths, crucial to both a strong party and a healthy democracy. Labour's first year in government has been challenging. The deputy leadership election could offer us the opportunity to do that most challenging of things: refresh and renew in office.

At the Fabian Society, we will be seeking to play our part in the upcoming deputy leadership election. We will be holding a hustings to give members an opportunity to hear from and question the candidates, providing a platform for them to discuss their ideas for the role, their respective visions for the future of our party, and their plans to deliver for the country and win again. All Fabian members – whether or not they are Labour party members – will be able to vote and have their say in the contest.

Labour party conference is an opportunity for us to take stock, and to think about where we go from here. Our programme – which we are calling 'The Festival of Ideas' – is our biggest yet. We have an exciting array of nearly 40 events in the Bluecoat arts centre. We will bring together leading thinkers from across the party and the wider movement to discuss some of the key issues of our times in an open and comradely way. I do hope that you can join us for some of our events.

In the spirit of debate and discussion, this edition of Fabian Review explores Labour's relationship with liberalism. Stella Creasy argues that a renewed liberalism is the best defence we have against the rise of the populist right, as it provides agency, the right to challenge injustice, and to make progress. We have a challenging critique from Chloe Brooks, who argues that social liberalism in Labour is under threat, and must be defended. And we also hear from David Smith MP – one of the Blue Labour group of MPs – about where he thinks liberalism went wrong, and how we need to return to a politics of solidarity and mutual responsibility, focused on the common good. I do hope that you read and engage with all of these contributions, and I look forward to hearing what you think. **F**

# Shortcuts

## DEJA VU

To protect Britain, we must reckon with two decades of failed interventions — *Calvin Bailey MP*




Just over four years ago, on 28 August, I was flying one of the last RAF planes out of Kabul as my leadership of the UK's evacuation flights came to an end. Every year, on this anniversary, I see widespread gratitude towards the brave servicepeople under my command who evacuated 15,000 people. There is also anger at shambolic earlier decision-making that put us in greater danger and held us back from doing more. And there is bitterness at the legacy of our involvement in NATO's 20-year Afghanistan mission. It is a moment of reflection for me and my fellow veterans. We must be better at honouring the 457 people we lost, and rewarding the sacrifices of all those who served.

Our history of troubled interventions has also shaped how our society thinks about the purpose of our armed forces, making a renewed, open discussion about their role essential. We cannot rebuild our defences and protect Britain without creating a shared understanding of what defence is for. In this time of increasing threats, we need robust public support for greater investment in everything from weapons systems to military housing. We need all our people and communities to feel positive about committing to service, as I did as a teenager. Many of us will need to play our part, whether in rebuilding our hollowed-out army, taking up roles in the new home guard, or contributing skills to our defence industry.

One of the greatest barriers to rearming is therefore a loss of trust – not in our armed forces, but in the purposes to which they are put. As a veteran and an MP, it's now my job to help restate to different communities and generations the connection between the freedoms we enjoy and the necessity of defending them. Our way of life is one where people have the right to speak and live freely, and the responsibility to do so respectfully despite our differences. We must not take this for granted, because liberal democratic integrity is inherently threatening to self-serving autocrats like Putin. They thrive by destroying social trust and imprisoning minds in the shackles of despair – despair that no alternative exists to strongman rule, despite all its flagrant abuses. Authoritarian powers increasingly feel free to use any means, including outright military aggression, to expand the safe space for far-right corruption beyond their borders.

Our vulnerability to present threats is intertwined with our recent history. Rebuilding public confidence in the purpose of defence requires us to starkly contrast our current circumstances and strategy with misconceived interventions like Iraq and Libya. Polling now finds half the UK population saying they would not fight if called upon, while 41 per cent of the public believe that the Iraq war made the world less safe. This is understandable, because it is based on a recognition that the era of global interventions following 9/11 was a major strategic failure. Our collective actions not only failed to anticipate and prevent the escalating threats of today, but contributed to them, by undermining hard-won international norms and institutions.

Fractured public confidence is not only a legacy of the past. Right now, the reputation of our defence industry and even our armed forces is again being challenged – by continued, if limited, arms sales to Israel, and by RAF overflights of Gaza whose purpose has taken far too long to make clear. We cannot shy away from these uncomfortable conversations if we are to pull together in face of threats that are immediate and deadly.

Putin's Russia has forces of a scale we have not faced for decades. They have demonstrated a long-term commitment to attack and undermine us using every available tactic. Threats from constantly increasing cyberspace attacks, sabotage of essential power and communications systems, and even missile and drone attack on our cities must not be underestimated.

The danger is right on our doorstep, right now. Putin's agents have already used chemical weapons – supposedly the boldest of international red lines – in an attack on UK soil. In my own constituency, Russia-linked channels have been inciting and organising both arson attacks and hate crimes designed to split our communities apart.

The days of hubristic Western intervention aimed at promoting a certain political system abroad are gone. To clear the decks and rebuild, we need to say 'good riddance' to such ideas. The purpose of UK defence today is utterly distinct. The task before us is not promoting our values abroad. It is ensuring that the values we live by can survive, at home and among our allies, despite all the forces arrayed against us. This is why we must put the past behind us and come together – and this is why we must rearm. **F**

*Calvin Bailey is the Labour MP for Leyton and Wanstead. He served in the RAF for over 24 years, reaching the rank of wing commander*

## JOINING THE DOTS

The government, employers and educators need to work together — *Lauren Edwards MP*

For decades, young people have been told the same story: work hard, go to university, and the rewards will follow. But for too many graduates today, that promise rings hollow. They invest huge amounts of time, ambition, and money in their degrees – only to find limited opportunities and a job market that feels stuck in the past.

This is not about individual failings. It is about talent going to waste because our education and skills system is not in sync with the economy we actually have – or, even more obviously, the economy we'll have in the next five, 10, or 20 years. The gap leaves graduates frustrated, employers crying out for talent, and growth and innovation stalled.

The underlying problem is not laziness from students or complacency in universities. It is that our system is fragmented. Schools, colleges, and universities operate largely independently. Businesses rarely get a say in what's taught. Governments react slowly, often with short-term fixes rather than long-term strategies. If we want to give graduates genuine opportunities, the answer is obvious: join the dots. Education providers must work in close partnership with businesses, local leaders, and the wider public sector to deliver opportunities for the future.

Take Medway, the local authority area where my patch, Rochester and Strood, is located. Our local universities and MidKent college share facilities and avoid duplicate courses. It makes sense: pooling resources, cutting waste, and giving students training where the local economy is growing. With the green transition on the horizon, we need more of this approach everywhere – preparing engineers, supporting retrofitting specialists, and creating the next generation of scientists. Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) can help, but only if they are tied to real industry demand and include small and medium enterprises. The new Labour government gives us the chance to be bolder.

At a recent roundtable I chaired on green skills, one point came through clearly. Enthusiasm for net zero is high, but training to create the workforce needed to deliver it is not yet there. This picture of limited opportunity runs across sectors. In the NHS, newly-qualified doctors struggle to find placements locally. In construction, apprenticeships are in demand, but jobs don't always follow.

Government spending must go hand in hand with workforce planning. Big infrastructure projects like the Lower Thames Crossing are important in their own right; but crucially, they will also create jobs and apprenticeships for local people. The health secretary's 'graduate guarantee' plan for nursing and midwifery is welcome for the same reason – it will provide opportunities and reduce reliance on overseas workers.

Apprenticeships in digital industries, construction, or health are as important as academic degrees, and young people should be able to choose the right path for them without stigma. But this is not a battle between traditional academic and technical routes. We need both. Labour's 'youth guarantee' – ensuring every young person has access to education, training, or work – is set to give people greater choice. The recent announcement that the trailblazer scheme will be extended for another year is welcome, but we need a UK-wide rollout.

Other countries show what happens when education and industry work together. Germany's dual system combines classroom study with company-based training, keeping youth employment high and industry strong. Denmark has invested heavily in green skills and lifelong learning, helping it to lead the world in offshore wind. Singapore's SkillsFuture encourages people to keep learning and reskilling throughout their careers, with government and industry planning together.

We do not need to copy these systems wholesale, but we can learn from them. Britain finally has its own blueprint: our industrial strategy identifies sectors where we must grow, including clean energy, advanced manufacturing, health, and care. But we must make sure the skills pipeline is ready and reflects local economies and business needs. That means better coordination across Whitehall, giving local leaders powers to shape training, and prioritising government expenditure.

Most of all, we need a new mindset. Education does not stop at graduation. It is a lifelong endeavour, equipping people not just with knowledge but with opportunity. For graduates, that means leaving university confident their debt was worthwhile. For employers, it means a steady flow of talent ready for the future. And for Britain, it means an economy that is fairer, greener, and better prepared for what comes next.

The government recently published more on the Lifelong Learning Entitlement – a huge cultural shift which will be crucial to developing our labour market. The social contract between education and opportunity has frayed under the last Conservative government. But it can be repaired – if we join the dots. **F**

*Lauren Edwards is the Labour MP for Rochester and Strood*

## TANGLED WEB

Digital campaigning is often most effective at the local level — *Conor Pope*

Two days before voters went to the polls in 2010, the Guardian declared it to be 'the first social media election'.

That tag may have been premature. Yet 14 long years passed before Labour finally produced an election victory in the era of the smartphone.

Talk of a 'social media election' feels old fashioned today, since it would now be absurd to suggest that social media is not a prime mover of voting intention. According to Ofcom, by last year more than half of all adults in the UK were getting their news from social media, including more than three-quarters of 16 to 24-year-olds.

There are two sides to this phenomenon: macro and micro. Constant access to the internet means connections and messages can be traded instantly the world over, and we see the real-world effect on public opinion, from the impact of Israel's war in Gaza on voting patterns to foreign actors attempting to whip up social unrest and encourage anti-refugee sentiment.

But on the other side, much of politics is trending local, and digital engagement drives this effect rather than curbing it. Algorithms serve you content from what

they know about you, location included, and it turns out you're more likely to linger on a TikTok if it is about your area. Many people also join explicitly local online spaces on WhatsApp, Reddit, NextDoor and, still chief among them, Facebook.

To that end, at the last election Labour hired digital campaigners across the country to complement its more nationally-focused team in HQ, where I worked. These were specialists who could help design and deliver truly localised online campaigns in target seats across Britain.

One priority was filming videos with 'real voices': Conservative to Labour switchers talking about their reasons for moving away from the Tories. This approach embedded digital campaigning in a coherent system that tied different teams together. Voters were found on the doorstep through field campaigns led by data; in tandem, effective messages were developed using public attitudes research and performance-tested using online ads.

Significant effort went in to finding the online spaces where swing voters spent their time. Activist 'cohorts' were created in every target seat, encouraging supporters to connect with one another and share best practice about engaging with voters – in the process, creating their own digital community.

This led to a short campaign where Labour candidates' name recognition meant many were being stopped in the street. One target voter was so sick of seeing the local Labour party's YouTube ads that they threatened to report them to the police.

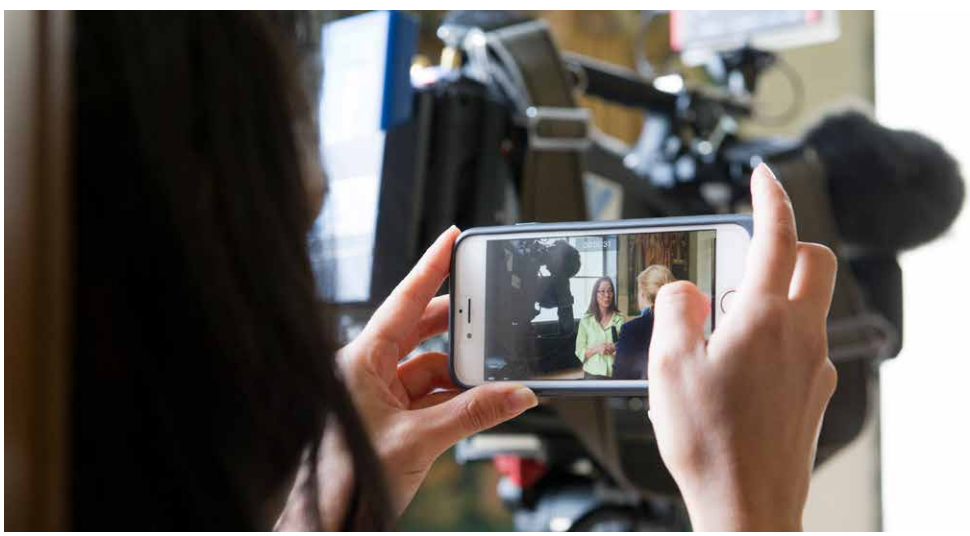
In the year since the general election, it feels like both the political and the online landscape have shifted with the surge in popularity of Reform UK. Many of us on the centre-left – including at my organisation, 411, which was set up by members of Labour's digital campaigns team after the election – are putting our efforts into researching and testing what now constitutes the cutting edge of online campaigning. We work with progressive groups and parties across the world to assess what is proving most effective in the latest elections to build the strongest possible playbook for the next general election.

For local campaigners, trying to compete with Nigel Farage's TikTok following is likely to be a dead end. The best practice for grassroots Labour activists is to focus on the local, whether the threat is Reform, a party of the left, or a multi-party split. This does not apply only to messaging – after all, every constituency Labour party across the country has experts in running a good local campaign – but also to where the voters you need to reach spend their time online.

You don't need to be a graphic designer. All you need to do is have a good message and get it in front of the right people. A flashy, well-edited video is nice to have, but every mobile phone can create content good enough to share.

The increasing volatility of election results has diminished the impact of an incumbency bonus for sitting MPs in recent years. But with voters' increasing focus on local issues, Labour has a huge opportunity to rediscover the electoral benefits of incumbency. Our task it to ensure that our MPs and candidates are effective local champions. Seat-level digital campaigns are the key to getting that message across. **F**

*Conor Pope worked for Labour's digital campaigns team in the 2024 general election, and is now a director at 411*



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## SAFETY IN NUMBERS

We must interrogate the statistics we rely on for policymaking — *Liz Hind*

The Fabian Society has always known the value of data. In 1895, the society even set up a new university, the London School of Economics, so that it could get better information to base its pamphlets and policy ideas on. Fabian analysis has always relied on data, and it has often been innovative in its use.

Ongoing advances in technology could transform the way we collect and analyse statistics for policymaking. We must, however, include everyone in this process to ensure we collect robust, unbiased data.

There are deep problems with our current official statistics. Management failings, a lack of funding and a falling response rate to surveys have all undermined confidence. Key datasets have not being published on time, leading to the resignations of senior managers. In response, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has increased its focus on "core statistics" and shifted resources away from more innovative work – for example, the development of the wellbeing dashboard.

But it is wrong to think that we can fix problems with official statistics by retreating to what we have always done. There was nothing inevitable about which statistics became the 'headline' numbers. And crucially, our society and our economy are both changing fast; our understanding of how they work, and how to measure them, must keep up. The way in which we measure the size of the economy – primarily through gross domestic product (GDP) – reflects a system set up in the 1940s. There are many criticisms of GDP, not only of how things that are measured are assigned a value, but also regarding what is not included: for example, unpaid work and the distribution of wealth.

We should also be sensitive to the ways in which we are collecting data. There is an increasing reliance on data that comes from administrative sources, such as tax collection or healthcare. Using this data is not problematic in principle, but because this data is effectively repurposed information, it can hide systemic biases that need

to be considered and understood. We are collecting more data than has ever been collected, but just because we can produce large quantities of data, this does not mean that the data being collected is the right data, or that it can produce an accurate, reliable picture that can be used as the basis of effective policymaking. As an example, if we tried to collect data about travel habits by tracking mobile phones, our data might turn out to be inaccurate because some people do not carry a smartphone with them, while others carry two: a work phone and a personal phone. This would lead to a systemic bias in the data collected.

Measuring what matters is best achieved by engaging with those directly affected. Earlier this year, the UN Statistical Commission endorsed the Copenhagen Framework. This framework sets out ways to enable the coproduction of data by communities that know the issues because they live them. We should embrace this approach and consider how we can use existing networks to further it. My own work with the Women's Budget Group has shown that, in the right circumstances, even people who are complete novices when it comes to statistics can make meaningful contributions to statistical debates. They just need the structures in place for our statistical bodies to be able to hear what they say.

All of these issues with how we collect and use statistics will have equalities implications. For historical reasons, we have not been good at thinking about what matters to different groups – for example, early censuses were designed to consider only the head of a household, and so could not capture women's work. To move forward, we need wide-reaching consultations with grassroots organisations representing marginalised groups. We also need to make sure that we use modern digital technology to allow more people to access the statistics that they need for campaigning, advocacy and fundraising.

We do not need to found another university to satisfy our need for good data. We are, however, at a crucial juncture where we have the opportunity to significantly innovate in how we collect, present and analyse statistics. Our statistical system has never stood still. It has always innovated to enable us to track important social and economic issues. Now, it needs to innovate as fast as our society and economy are changing. **F**

*Dr Liz Hind is a researcher in the history and philosophy of maths and statistics. She is on the executive of the Fabian Women's Network and currently works for the Women's Budget Group*

Rob Mieremet, CC0

## NO IDLE DREAMER

Denis Healey was defined by his loyalty to Labour — *Niall Devitt*

It is 1924 in West Yorkshire, on a green hillside not too far from the industrial town of Keighley. A little legion of young boys are lying in wait, ready to pounce on passersby. Their chief is Denis Winston Healey. Naughty, fiercely bright, and above all, fun, he is a natural leader.

Healey benefited from the rising meritocratic spirit of 20th century Britain, earning a place at Bradford grammar school before going on to achieve a double first in classics at Oxford University. This illustrious educational background fostered the strategic acumen that led to his commission as a second lieutenant in the Royal Engineers at the outbreak of the second world war. It was in this role that Healey became a distinguished war hero, with the bloody battle of Anzio his proving ground. Under his firm direction as a beach master, 36,000 soldiers and 3,200 vehicles landed successfully. He was twice mentioned in official dispatches, and in 1945, he was awarded an MBE.

The experience of wartime camaraderie left an indelible mark upon Healey, helping to shape his political outlook. As Major Denis Healey, still wearing his army battledress, he cut a dashing figure at the Labour party conference at Blackpool in May 1945.

Healey's conception of socialism was always practical. He considered a hands-on approach vital. For him, the left did not have the luxury of insisting on winning the argument, believing that virtue signalling and emotive posturing had simply handed consecutive victories to the Conservatives. In his own words: "The Fabians found socialism wandering aimlessly in cloud-cuckoo-land and set it working on the gas and water problems of the nearest town or village." Healey would serve on the executive of the society from 1954. While he had flirted with communism in the late 1930s, he was revolted by the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact in August 1939, which left him with a lasting loathing for Marxism. As such, he had little time for any within the movement who believed it was possible to snuggle up with Trotskyists.

Healey entered parliamentary politics in 1952, winning the Leeds South East byelection. He rose rapidly under Hugh Gaitskell, eventually becoming secretary of state for defence under the Wilson administration. In this role, he would combine his military prowess with adept geopolitical realism, drastically reducing British military presence 'East of Suez' to free up military resources to bolster the UK's defence of Europe. Against this backdrop, Healy was a staunch defender of the nuclear deterrent, resisting the lure of unilateralism and the electorally toxic CND. His finest moment was as chancellor of the exchequer. Rather like Rachel Reeves, he faced an economic disaster inherited from his Tory predecessor, Anthony Barber. To those who believed you could simply print money to kick-start an economy, he lectured them on the realities of 'the tiger of inflation'. And rather than get buffeted around by fiscal headwinds, he made a dash to the IMF to secure a bailout, making the tough but necessary cuts – moves which

ultimately blocked him from the chance of becoming party leader. Although by 1979 Healey had managed to reduce inflation to 6.5 per cent, the catastrophic own goal of the 'Winter of Discontent' bought Labour's period in office to an end; a historic moment that marked the collapse of the postwar consensus in Britain.

With Michael Foot elected to the helm of the Labour party in November 1980, Healey might have been tempted to join the vote-splitting SDP. Yet he viewed the project as largely a product of Roy Jenkins' failed political ambitions and monumental ego, and his tribal loyalty to the Labour party ensured that he never forgave the gaggle of discontented Gaitskellites. Instead, he would stay on and face down an ennobled Gladstonian purist, Tony Benn, in the performative deputy leader's election at Brighton in September 1981. It can be argued Healey single-handedly saved the party that dreadful year. Today, Healey would recognise much in the struggles of Rachel Reeves, under pressure from the market to explain the importance of fiscal responsibility to wayward MPs. Speaking truth, however, unpleasant, was something Healey – as a political grownup – excelled at, up until his death in October 2015 at the age of 98. Governing is difficult; gestures are easy. He knew this. Just as well he kept his sense of humour. F

*Niall Devitt is a historian and researcher specialising in Labour and transport history. The first part of his four-part history of the tube, Underground Railway: Crowded City 1801–1902, is published by Pen&Sword*

## BRIGHT START

Young people are in desperate need of expanded and protected youth services — *Natasha Irons MP*

Like many across the country, Raina left education full of potential but riddled with fear. She battled poor mental health, felt isolated, and thought she was "not enough" for the world of work. Meeting Charlie, a youth worker at the King's Trust, was the start of a lifechanging shift. She received support with her CV and help with job applications. Most importantly of all, Rania was listened to, believed in and had a hand to hold in moments of self-doubt.

Rania went on to apply for three NHS roles and was offered every single one. She now works as a band 2 healthcare assistant. In her own words: "I hardly recognise myself." This is the power of youth work.

But 14 years of savage Tory cuts have decimated youth services. More than 1,000 youth centres have closed; one in eight councils now have no youth centre in their area; and youth workers – many highly-qualified practitioners – are trapped in low-paid, insecure work. They are leaving the sector in droves.

Youth provision is on a cliff edge even as demand for support continues to rise. And today's youth workers are on the frontline of increasingly complex issues, such as serious youth violence, violence against women and girls and escalating mental health crises. Just last year, the Children's Society's Good Childhood Report revealed that British 15-year-olds have the lowest life satisfaction in Europe.

Youth services are a vital form of early intervention. They can combat loneliness, help prevent mental health crises and drive young people away from crime. Yet investing in youth services is not only about improving young people's wellbeing and safer communities: it makes clear financial sense too. The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) estimates that that for every £1 we save by closing a youth club, lower educational attainment and consequently reduced tax revenues cost society almost £3.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, I have invited dozens of young people to parliament to speak about the issues that matter most to them – from the pressures of social media to wait times for mental health care. I hear the same ask from them over and over. Whether online or in person, young people want supportive spaces where they can build relationships, try out new things and build communities. Which is why, in May, I secured a cross-party debate in parliament calling for statutory protections and long-term funding for youth services. Without these protections, cash-strapped councils are often left with no choice but to scale back provision.

I am proud to be a Labour member of parliament serving a government that is putting young people back on the political agenda. In March, the culture secretary, Lisa Nandy MP, launched a nationwide survey and focus groups to hear from young people about the services they need. Their voices will shape the National Youth Strategy, which the government will publish this autumn. The plan – backed by an initial funding package of £185m – is a chance to end the patchwork lottery of youth provision and ensure that there are opportunities for young people in every postcode. By recognising the vital role of youth work, we can give young people a stake in their communities and build a stronger society for all. F

*Natasha Irons is the Labour MP for Croydon East. She is a member of the culture, media and sport select committee and chair of the APPG for youth affairs*

# Fit for the future

Liberalism is under pressure – but it provides us with the strongest foundations to respond to the far right, argues *Stella Creasy MP*

*Stella Creasy is the Labour and Co-operative MP for Walthamstow*

Over the years, the term 'woke' has attached itself to a variety of cultural sensibilities. Now, however, it is chiefly a term of abuse on social media – second only to its more obviously offensive cousin, 'libtard'. In the context of a political reorientation toward authoritarian populism, liberal values, ideas and passions are increasingly being blamed for Labour's struggle to retain voters – with many arguing the lesson to learn is that adhering to them is the reason for Trump's ascendancy and the collapse of the democrats in America.

Whether extoling the benefits of immigration, speaking up for trans inclusion or even just querying an all-male panel, you can hear the eyes roll and – or so reactionaries would have you think – the votes leaving the ballot box. As the backlash against progressive ideals continues to build steam around the world, liberalism is increasingly portrayed as just a failed experiment in being nice.

Yet there is another story to tell. Throughout our history, liberalism has informed landmark Labour legislation that has changed the lives of millions for the better. The legalisation of homosexuality, an end to the death penalty, and more recently the Equalities Act and the Human Rights Act all feature on the list of achievements of previous Labour governments. While some in Blue Labour argue that liberalism should find no home at all in the PLP at all if it is to appeal to the working class, others ask: without it, what is the point of Labour at all?

How did we get into this mess? Partly, because liberalism's amorphous nature means it is easy to mischaracterise. Traditionally painted as a concern for the agency of the individual, liberalism has suffered dilution from both the left and the right. Some on the left also worry about its connection to the 'dirty secret' of collaboration between liberal associations and trade unionists around the time of the birth of the Labour party: parliamentary candidates stood representing both at the turn of the 20th century. John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge, who both provided key planks of the Labour-initiated postwar settlement, were card-carrying Liberals. Yet liberal links were and are viewed with suspicion in Labour circles.

Importantly, the liberalism of the Labour movement is far removed from the opportunistic attitude of the Liberal Democrats. Theirs is a politics that values the rights of the individual only insofar as there is political gain to be had and a misleading bar chart to be drawn. Nor is it the economic liberalism of the right, which champions the free market and ownership of personal property above all. This stands in stark contrast with a social liberalism that intervenes to protect individuals from the very impact of the unequal distribution of such goods.

**The liberal tradition on the left rests on a simple premise – that enshrining the rights of individuals, in contrast to the collective, helps them build a better world**

The liberal tradition on the left rests on a simple premise – that enshrining the rights of individuals, in contrast to the collective, helps them build a better world. Of course, many on the right value the preservation and protection of the rights of the individual as the foundation of their definition of the good society. But for the liberal left, such rights are more than a foundation – citizens must also have the social and economic resources to *realise* their rights.

Gage Skidmore CC BY-SA 2.0

What does all this mean in practice? At their most coherent, social liberals ask, when faced with injustice in society: how can we best give individuals the tools to emancipate themselves? The Equalities Act is not about telling someone how to ice a cake, whatever the Daily Mail may claim. It is simply a way to ensure everyone is free to go about their day and participate in society – whether being able to get on a bus in a wheelchair or not be discriminated against when trying to get a school place because of your religious faith.

If liberalism is about ending oppression and freeing people from the pressures inequalities create, how has it come to be associated with telling people how to behave or else be 'cancelled'? Demanding that someone is either 'for' or 'against' a cause is fundamentally illiberal, since it requires conformity, not consent. Yet when there is little confidence in democratic processes to help facilitate conversation, shouting louder is often all that is left to win the argument.

Liberals need to push back on this trend, not least because, perhaps paradoxically, liberalism provides the foundation for the strongest progressive response to the far right. Populism tells the public that their fate is beyond their control and finds someone else to blame – often, the story goes, a cabal of elites has imprisoned them in a world in which they pay the price for the welfare of others, whether immigrants, women or people of colour. Its proponents fill the air with clickbait political claims about how being freed from these scapegoats will relieve them of this burden. Reclaiming liberalism from the wild west of current political discussion starts with being clearer – and prouder – about what social liberalism is and is not, and how it holds as sacrosanct the right to disagree.

Given the evidence diversity nourishes and grows economic and social prosperity, liberals must also set out how and why living in a world where difference is suppressed offers no positive future for anyone. That story cannot be told at the expense of helping all citizens achieve their own goals – the best way to fight the nihilism of the far right is to inspire the excitement of liberation that the left can offer. To show people at the sharp end of change, in word and deed, that they can have agency because they can use their rights to challenge injustice and make progress.

With the Human Rights Act itself now being contested – even amongst some on the left – the importance of mechanisms for individual citizens to protect themselves from overbearing governments has never been more stark. The impartial enforcement of human rights is the best way to give everyone equal status as decision makers in our democracy. Human rights are, apart from anything else, about the barriers that can silence voices. Recognising this does not mean being uncritical of or unthinking about how human rights legislation is applied. It does, however, mean calling out those who want to scrap the HRA: what rights do they think they and their peers should no longer have? And what will that mean for free speech?

With so many feeling unheard by their elected representatives – and being told they are right to feel so by populists of all stripes – liberalism needs a reboot. Its focus on protecting individuals from the state and dismantling inequalities of power by giving people rights with which to fight back must be renewed. Only then can its proponents ensure that liberalism shapes this Labour government as it did in previous generations. Rights-based frameworks are intended to free people to lead the lives they want, not imprison them in a world of woke madness. As the screaming about things going 'too far' gathers apace, we should not be ashamed to stand up for our liberal ideals – and shout about them, not at each other. F

# Hearts and minds

## A renewed confidence in its liberal social democratic roots can help Labour shape the narrative, writes *Karl Pike*

*Dr Karl Pike is a lecturer in public policy and British politics at Queen Mary, University of London. After the 2010 general election he became the political advisor to the shadow home secretary and then then shadow foreign secretary*

We are living in a period of increased illiberalism. In the US, the Trump administration is defined by its illiberalism; from the UK right comes a discourse on Britishness and ethnicity that excludes Britons from their own Britishness. After the racist riots of 2024, this summer saw misinformation spread about the policing of protests around asylum accommodation in Epping. A Reform UK politician recently queried the role of women in the police.

I do not believe that Britain is an illiberal country when it comes to, for example, views about being British. Data from the British Social Attitudes Survey backs up this view. But I do think we are seeing increased illiberalism, and anti-liberalism, in our politics, perhaps in part influenced by the increasingly extreme far right politics in the US. The Labour party has a responsibility, as a government and as a centre-left political tradition, to counter this illiberalism, which takes different forms.

Past Liberal thinkers – including William Beveridge and John Maynard Keynes – made hugely significant contributions to Britain's – and Labour's – postwar story. The social democratic tradition developed over the last century and half delivers important liberal goals as part of a collective, shared endeavour: individual flourishing within strong communities and through collective action.

The current Labour government should be more confident in its social democratic ideology. That includes the left-liberal component that upholds and strengthens universal rights, defends a shared concept of humanity, permits dissent in a healthy democratic polity, and trusts in public policies that we know deliver on Labour values and strengthen our society – in both the short and the long term.

The case for greater liberalism is not accepted by everyone within the Labour party. Most obviously, the Blue Labour faction privileges a conservative component within Labour's ideology. Today's Blue Labour thinking, as Marc Stears recently argued, is Trump-inspired in some ways. Amid Trump's politics, Labour's liberal politics just won't work – so goes the Blue Labour argument. Maurice Glasman recently told the Observer that he wanted to see welfare cuts, and criticised Labour politicians defending 'free stuff'. An MP sympathetic to Blue Labour was 'happy' to say the higher education sector – full disclosure, I work in a UK university – should be hollowed out. A Blue Labour policy statement suggested Labour should be opposed to equality, diversity and inclusion policies.

These are bad ideas. Blue Labour thinkers seem to believe that defeating left liberalism is key to Labour's success. Yet that ignores the progress that has been, and can, be made through Labour's social democratic political tradition: life-changing public services like Sure Start, equalities legislation to tackle discrimination, a human rights framework to challenge decision-making, to name a few.

### Enhancing Labour's liberalism

These debates can appear rather abstract – a distraction when many in politics want to be 'getting on with the job'. But ideological debates matter, including when a party is in office. Whether intentionally or through circumstance, governments can become inconsistent by following the ups and downs of the political agenda. Having a coherent ideology is an underappreciated way of avoiding or managing a busy, unpredictable political environment. Indeed, it may be that Blue Labour gets so much attention in part because some of the people involved speak in very ideological ways: they talk about conservatism, liberalism, socialism and capitalism. Social democrats should be encouraged to do this, too. To be ideological is not to be dogmatic. It is to talk about your understanding of the world and why you think it makes sense. And it is something Keir Starmer should do more of.

In relation to Labour's liberalism, I would highlight the government's approach to migration as a key area where it needs to act with more confidence. There are many others that could be discussed too; I am sure some are springing to the reader's mind right now. I have opted for migration because of the attention it has received in Labour's first year or so in office, and the connection to Labour's social

democratic-liberal tradition: the liberty and freedom of the individual, within an egalitarian politics that believes in shared provision, and a 'common endeavour'.

Some undoubtedly positive moves have come from the government: cancelling the Rwanda scheme, for example. Bridget Phillipson's rhetoric on international student migration has also marked a welcome change, and the government as a whole – no doubt with significant input from the Department for Education – announced the continuation of a right to remain in the UK after graduation for a period, albeit reduced to 18 months.

In other areas, policymaking has gone in an illiberal direction, including around settlement and citizenship rules. But the area I wish to focus on in particular, and where Labour's liberalism has very obviously been in retreat, is the government's overall position on migration as encapsulated in its political rhetoric. Here, Keir Starmer's comments on migration have been deeply troubling.

I wrote in my pre-election book, Getting Over New Labour, that while a migration bureaucracy is clearly necessary, migration policymaking is located within a wider politics that includes racism, misinformation, and scapegoating. It is the responsibility of Labour politicians to influence this wider political environment, and to contribute both values and evidence to the debate. The prime minister's rhetoric on migration has fallen short, to say the least. He has since expressed some regret for his choice of words, among them the suggestion that the UK risked becoming an 'island of strangers'. Yet the Labour leadership's approach to migration has, for some time, played with fire. Attacking the Conservatives for 'a one-nation experiment in open borders', for example, chose political attack over progressive politics.

It is the responsibility of Labour politicians to influence the wider political environment, and to contribute both values and evidence to the debate

Since the summer, and the attention Nigel Farage and Reform UK have received, the government has appeared even more reactive, and even less confident in its values. With the level of net migration now on a downwards trajectory, Labour should have seized this moment to disaggregate the statistics in public policy terms, and to reframe the debate in terms of the (perfectly good) reasons for issuing visas to enter the UK. Policy debates can then be had around the work, study and family routes, with a focus on the evidence and centred around real choices that people can engage with.

On asylum policy, it is welcome that the government has recognised the only way to fully address small boat crossings is an agreement with the French government. Yet the pilot scheme announced is some distance from what is required. A UK-French process for applicants in France is key. That way, people can access a clear, rights-respecting asylum process. This would reduce small boat crossings as well as the number of people awaiting a decision in the UK.

## Conclusion

Labour's agency – its power to influence our politics and the ideas that feed into it – has appeared somewhat limited in office. In relation to the prime minister specifically, some notable interventions have been recognised as mistakes, and seemed to – whether through accident or design – emphasise the agendas of rival political forces. One of those forces is illiberalism, coming from parts of the British right: something that may partly define the next election and the years beyond. Labour needs the confidence to challenge these ideas, and to use its political capital in ways that can further a longstanding, contrasting set of values. In the face of illiberalism, we should defend liberalism. **F**

# Keep the faith

Faith communities are an essential ally in the fight against inequality and conservatism, writes *Anna Dixon MP*

*Dr Anna Dixon MBE is the Labour MP for Shipley. She is the chair of Christians on the Left*

"The rich man in his castle/ the poor man at his gate/ God made them high and lowly/ and ordered their estate." This verse of the 19th-century hymn, All Things Bright and Beautiful, is thankfully omitted from modern songbooks. At the time it was written, the church defended hierarchy and sought to preserve the existing social order rather than challenging injustice and inequalities. Such views are no longer acceptable to today's churchgoers.

It would be a mistake, however, to think of progressive Christianity as a modern phenomenon. There has long been a tradition of radical Christian thought in Britain, which in turn has influenced the wider labour movement. Perhaps most notably, the first leader of the Labour party, Keir Hardie, was a Christian socialist.

I am one of over 50 parliamentarians who are members of Christians on the Left. As of this year, I am also proud to be the group's chair. With 2,000 members across the UK, it is one of the larger affiliated socialist societies, with a history dating back to the founding of the Christian Socialist Movement in 1960. Of course, the links between Christianity and socialism go back much further. Consider John Ball, the 14th-century priest and rebel, who was most famous for his part in the Peasant's Revolt of 1381, during which he preached social equality and questioned the position of the ruling classes and landowners. Historians often date the birth of modern Christian socialism to 1848, when FD Maurice and other Chartists led the movement. More formal organisations followed, including the Christian Social Union, which was founded by Scott Holland and Charles Gore in 1889.

**By embracing modern progressive Christian socialism, Labour can take a steal on the right and ensure that the Trumpian flavour of Christian social conservatism does not take root**

Secularism and statism may have dominated the Labour party at times in the past, but today's party – and the government – increasingly recognise the need to respect faith and belief, to partner with faith communities, and to embrace faith as a progressive force in politics. This is in line with our founding values as a party, but also reflective of modern Britain, where, according to the 2021 census, six in 10 people identify as having a religious identity.

## Church and politics

Growing up during the Thatcher years, I witnessed the shifting contours of Britain: jobs being destroyed across swathes of the northern industrial heartlands, the miners' strike and heavy-handed policing, and a new era of individualism as the market was let rip. This excessive materialism was personified by Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney' character, who was the antithesis of the Christian values I was taught. In my Methodist church in Yorkshire, being a Christian was not just about helping the poor; it was more radical, focused on changing the structures that caused poverty and inequality. My socialist and Christian values of solidarity with the poor and marginalised, equality, and social justice remain inextricably linked to this day.

During this time, it was common to hear people trot out cliches such as "the Church of England is the Tory party at prayer." In actual fact, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, set up a commission to look into the issue of urban poverty. The Faith in the City report published in 1985 – forty years ago this year – blamed the poverty

in the inner cities on a range of government policies and was politically explosive, causing a backlash from Conservatives. It led to the establishment of the Church Urban Fund, and gave voice to those who the churches were encountering, challenging the view that individuals were to blame for their situation.

## Faith into action

Today we see the contribution of faith communities on every high street and across the country. Many are filling gaps in state support resulting from over a decade of Conservative austerity. Walk into almost any church in the country, and you will find a timetable of activities including toddler groups, lunch clubs, youth clubs, memory cafes, warm spaces, night shelters and food banks. For some in today's church, it is through volunteering in social action projects that they first directly encounter people living in poverty. Any lingering belief that poverty is caused by idleness – perhaps a legacy of early Victorian Christian rhetoric – is soon dispelled by listening to the stories of people they meet. You don't have to spend long talking to vulnerable people – someone in the local food bank, working two jobs yet still unable to make ends meet; someone at the homeless shelter, sofa surfing because they split up from their wife; someone made redundant, with nowhere to go because they couldn't keep up their rental payments – to start to ask a different set of questions. Why doesn't work pay better? Why does someone have to accept a zero-hours contract? Why don't renters have more security?

These are the working people for whom a Labour government has ended fire and rehire, abolished exploitative zero-hour contracts, increased the minimum wage, and ended no fault eviction. Labour is also tackling homelessness and investing in social and affordable homes. As people of faith increasingly encounter the consequences of over a decade of Tory neglect of public services, the Labour movement can engage them, and in doing so, gain strong advocates for the difference a government focused on social justice can make.

## Faith communities as partners

Delivering on the government's missions will require the contribution of faith communities. Whether developing policies such as the youth strategy, child poverty strategy or tackling issues like homelessness and refugee support, it is vital that government departments engage with faith communities, who are often engaged with and close to people whose voices are seldom heard.

The Faith Covenant, developed and promoted by the APPG on faith and society, has proven to be a positive way for local authorities and faith communities to develop trust and work in partnership. There are also several national initiatives helping bring together and equip local faith communities to deliver more social value. The Churchworks Commission, which grew out of the response of churches during Covid, now works with 1500 churches across 16 denominations to equip them with resources to address urgent social issues in communities across the country. The Gather Movement works with over 8,000 churches and charities across 150 towns and cities to generate community-based regeneration. It has mapped the contribution of social action in Coventry and found that church-based parent and toddler groups reach 50 per cent of early-years children in the city. Similar work is now being replicated across Greater Manchester.

Recognising what is already going on is a first step, but Labour must establish stronger partnerships with faith communities to develop inclusive strategies and deliver lasting change.

## Social liberalism vs conservatism within the church

While the church has seen continuous progressive social action, there has perhaps been a tendency for socially conservative views to persist in some churches. Some political commentators are predicting a resurgence in socially conservative views, citing Blue Labour and the Conservative 'anti-woke' rhetoric as well the influence of the US, where Trump's alliance with American evangelical Christians was in part credited for his re-election.

In the US, however, over half of Republicans think Christianity is important to being truly American; just one in four Conservative voters think the same, only slightly higher than the proportion of Labour voters. There are currently few signs that the UK right has a major religious appeal, although we have some of the same policies which have the support of the religious right in the US become salient here, such as attacks on women's reproductive rights, trans and gay rights and sex education teaching in schools.

The popularity of the late Pope Francis among British Catholics, who welcomed his focus on poverty reduction, LGBTQ+ inclusion and the climate crisis, suggests that social liberalism is alive and well in the UK. The role of churches in welcoming refugees and speaking up against divisive rhetoric on immigration is another contrast with religious stances in America. And the Archbishop of York's recent intervention against Nigel Farage's proposal for mass deportations suggests the Church of England, at least, is prepared to call out politicians on the right.

## What is the place of faith in the modern Labour party?

The Labour party actively engaged with faith communities during the election through Faith in Labour, a theme that has continued in office, with the prime minister recently appointing a faith adviser based in No 10. Additionally, a group of MPs have been appointed as faith and belief champions across a diverse range of denominations and religious traditions. These are positive steps and reflect the fact that we do not live in a purely secular society.

The government must recognise the role that faith and belief play in how people live, work and play, as well as in their politics. The old secular liberalism that aimed to keep faith out of politics is long dead. On the other hand, those who want to keep politics out of the church will find it hard to do so when they open their doors to provide food and support; they cannot ignore the structural causes of the poverty, loneliness, and mental health problems they encounter. By embracing modern progressive Christian socialism, Labour can take a steal on the right and ensure that the Trumpian flavour of Christian social conservatism does not take root here. F

# Part of the main

## The atomised individual is at the heart of modern liberalism – we must centre solidarity instead, argues *David Smith MP*

*David Smith is the Labour MP for North Northumberland. He is the UK's special envoy for freedom of religion or belief and a member of the Blue Labour parliamentary group*

In 1995, as a politics and modern history undergraduate at the University of Glasgow, I was first introduced to Francis Fukuyama's seminal book The End of History and the Last Man. Its argument – briefly, that the west's victory over communism presaged the universal and permanent ascendency of both liberal democracy and capitalism – is one of the most influential sociopolitical commentaries of the last 30 years.

It is also profoundly wrong, at least in its core argument: the rise of authoritarian China and militant Islamism since the turn of the century are enough to show us that ideological divergence remains alive and well. But Fukuyama was right in one sense: the end of the cold war did end any meaningful ideological contest in the west, including in the UK, and a form of liberalism has remained ascendant ever since.

I say a form of liberalism because the kind which has predominated in much of British public discourse since the 1990s – in politics, the media and the arts – has diverged from classical liberalism, the promise of which was central to undermining the Iron Curtain's foundations. The classical strain values the free and respectful exchange of ideas within a community and a democratic political system that protects people from majoritarian overreach (while not promising to respect or protect the content of their ideas). In the west, this classical liberalism has increasingly made way for a kind of 'illiberal liberalism'.

This new doctrine values conformity over free-thinking, self-actualisation over solidarity, rights over responsibilities, and anywhere over somewhere. Instead of promising a social environment which enables a respectful exchange of ideas, it is an ideological system with an evangelical zeal to convert all to its truth.

Core to this ideology is the atomised individual, untethered from place, community or identity in a globalised world, and unhindered by social responsibility. This is an ideology under which some have prospered, but many others have been left behind. It is also the consensus in every major political party. When the focus is on economic issues, it is often called neoliberalism. When the focus is on what might be termed social issues, the common name is progressive liberalism.

These twin liberalisms are normally viewed as the two great rivals of modern politics, with the former rooted in the Conservative party and the latter located within Labour. In reality, these ideologies are siblings, bound by their shared centring of the uninhibited individual. In popular culture, one is a great evil, whilst association with the other is the opposite – indeed, being a progressive liberal is shorthand for being "one of the good guys".

When Margaret Thatcher, the political architect of British neoliberalism, proclaimed in 1987: "…and who is society? There is no such thing!", she was articulating the idea of liberal economic individualism. Shortly afterwards, Harry Enfield would parody this idea with his comedy song 'Loadsamoney'. Yet we can also perceive a thread linking progressive liberalism and the antics of more modern caricatures such Bonnie Blue. Both liberalisms are the end result of individual autonomy becoming the irreducible unit of our political consensus.

This undiluted individualism which forms the core of the modern iteration of liberalism gives me pause when associating myself with the label. It goes without saying that I am Labour. I come from a tradition – and I use that word advisedly – which centres solidarity. A tradition that finds its origins in the mutualist and co-operative movements, and which speaks of common endeavour. I also come from a movement that once celebrated the importance of place, and the pride and dignity which comes from making and achieving things together. This way of understanding the world simultaneously respects the concept of 'each to his own', whilst knowing the deep truth that, in the end, I am my brother's keeper.

As I see it, Britain in 2025 needs to rediscover the importance of a common good – including the truth that politics alone cannot achieve a flourishing society: it will take a relational commitment from each of us. The age of the neoliberal or progressive social contract, where atomised individuals exist as 'service-users' in a transactional arrangement with a fracturing state, is over. It is time for the reestablishment of a social covenant in which individuals and communities alike make deep and binding commitments of trust to one another in the pursuit of the common good. It is time for a new era in which our individual rights are matched by our responsibilities to one another.

I believe that our fundamental sociopolitical orthodoxies are up for grabs more than at any other point since the fall of the Berlin wall. As the late Pope Francis said, we're not living through an era of change, but a change of era. Perhaps it is time to revisit the strengths of classical liberalism – which, even if it does not determine the exact shape of the common good, may yet enable us to find our way to it. **F**

# Changing tack

## The government should reverse its proscription of Palestine Action and set out to cultivate lively, informed debate, writes *Iggy Wood*

*Iggy Wood is the editor of the Fabian Review*

In early August, I watched in Parliament Square as police hauled away – or, sometimes, wheeled away – one unresisting protester after another. It was not the first time I had seen peaceful protesters arrested, but it was the first time I had seen them arrested as terrorists.

Since the proscription of Palestine Action, more than 1,300 people have been arrested under terrorism legislation. The UK has been condemned by the UN's human rights chief, and Labour backbenchers from across the party, many of whom originally voted in favour of proscription, have denounced the ban in the Commons. The government claims that Palestine Action is not a non-violent organisation, and that many protesting in support of the organisation do not know its full nature due to restrictions on reporting ongoing cases. However, according to a declassified intelligence report recently obtained by the New York Times, Palestine Action did not advocate violence against people and was unlikely to do so in the future.

The government should reverse the ban. If it does not, it may well be overturned by the courts anyway. It should then set out to ensure that its response to Palestine Action is remembered as a mere blip, set against the backdrop of a concerted government drive to reinvigorate free expression and public debate.

Reflexive liberal critics of Labour should remember that one of the biggest expansions in free speech rights since the Human Rights Act will be provided by the government's employment rights bill. In daily life, being able to freely criticise your manager is at least as important as being able to criticise the government. Currently, however, a worker who is dismissed after less than two year's continuous employment can bring an unfair dismissal case only in very limited, and difficult-to-prove, circumstances. This gives employers a great deal of arbitrary power to sack employees, including for perceived criticism or slights. Labour's legislation, which is set to give workers day-one employment rights, will help to rebalance this power dynamic.

To go further, Labour must start from first principles, and ask: why does free speech matter? JS Mill, perhaps the most important liberal thinker, justified extensive free speech rights on a number of grounds. Perhaps the most famous was the argument that open debate tends towards truth and understanding. His reasoning was that, under the scrutiny of the public gaze, partial truths are refined and conventional wisdom tested. Mill's reasoning had its weaknesses – most notably, he gave scant attention the impact of dehumanising rhetoric on the ability of people to *participate* in such a 'marketplace of ideas' – but for the most part, it remains compelling. Mill's vision is also very much a part of the Fabian tradition, which arose, in part, out of the liberal Radical movement, and which has long championed the importance of open debate and discussion on the left.

Note that Mill's argument, as befitting a utilitarian, is instrumental. It is about the kind of society that will result from protecting free speech – ie, one in which betters ideas are adopted because of lively, informed debate. In 2025, achieving such a society will depend on more than just our civil rights.

First, our information environment is polluted by an unaccountable press and poorly-regulated social media behemoths – with one of the most influential platforms controlled by someone actively calling for the overthrow of our democratically elected government. As discussed in a recent Fabian pamphlet, Pressing Issues, there are a variety of policies that Labour could adopt to tackle the concentration of power in our media landscape, including stricter antitrust rules and public funding for smaller outlets.

Second, healthy public debate requires a mainstream left that is prepared to stand up for its principles. There is currently a social democracy-shaped hole in our national conversation. If we do not defend left-wing values, we should not be surprised that Britain's Overton window continues to slide rightwards. Does the public know how much better public services could be with continental levels of taxation? Shouldn't we tell them?

Labour must remember that, as the party of government, it has a preeminent role in shaping public discourse. While much of the media may be hostile, it remains true that if the prime minister makes a speech, or unveils a flagship policy, journalists will report on it. Facilitating free and fair debate in this country, then, is not just about refraining from knee-jerk attempts to stifle dissent. It is about being having faith in the public to make an informed choice – and faith in ourselves that that choice will be the left. **F**

# Human cost

## Social liberalism in Labour must be defended, writes *Chloe Brooks*

*Chloe Brooks is Young Labour's LGBT+ officer. She was the inaugural North West rep on the national Labour Students committee from 2022 to 2024*

The community I grew up in is increasingly dominated by far-right-led protests outside a local hotel, staged under the guise of 'protecting women and girls'. These demonstrations reflect the racist attitudes emboldened by Reform – whose support in the polls has surged beyond 30 per cent – and deploy a familiar tactic: co-opting women's safety as a more palatable vehicle for socially conservative attacks on vulnerable groups.

This is nothing new. As a teenager, I was told by peers that they felt unsafe changing alongside a lesbian like me. This was homophobia – no less than when I was shouted at in the street for holding hands with another woman. It is disorienting to see these same arguments now resurfacing as transphobic arguments, with my identity as a woman being routinely hijacked to legitimise hostility towards LGBT+ people and immigrants.

Unless we reject these tactics, life will become even less safe for marginalised groups. Where is Labour's leadership when it is time to defend the socially liberal values at the core of our movement?

Labour members clearly want a different approach from the government. Survation polling shows that two-thirds of members want the government to move to the left. 71 per cent think proscribing Palestine Action was wrong, and 84 per cent want to see the government scrap the two-child benefit cap. These figures show a party base as committed as ever to social justice, equality and solidarity. Our leadership too often points to "public opinion" as justification for these alienating positions, even as Labour has, at points, fallen up to 15 points behind Reform. There is no evidence that our retreat on Labour values has delivered electoral reward. If anything, it has brought us popular decline.

For the LGBT+ members I represent on the Young Labour national committee, the rise of Reform is not an abstract threat. A majority of Labour members under 45 believe the government's stance on trans rights is wrong, with young LGBT+ members in particular hurt by the positions that Labour is taking. Many are already experiencing growing hostility, and the growing prospect of a Reform government only intensifies their fears. The fact that Reform has any prospect of forming a government is all the more frustrating because of what Labour has already achieved since coming to power last year, including ambitious policy programmes on workers' rights, public ownership of rail, and energy. But these gains have been undermined by damaging missteps. The winter fuel allowance cut, attempted disability benefit cuts, the continuation of the puberty blockers ban, and a shamefully timid position on Israel's genocide in Gaza all suggest a government moving in the wrong direction. Polling and byelections suggest the public can see it too.

One answer repeatedly offered is to focus on a supposedly socially conservative Red Wall. Advocates of this approach argue in favour of leaning into the culture war and downplaying 'woke' reforms. But these proposals are the result of filtering events through a patronising, simplistic caricature of the British working class.

Successful parties do not acquiesce to their opponents' narratives – they set their own. Thatcher did it. Blair did it. Now, Nigel Farage is doing it, telling a story of national decline in which asylum seekers, trans people and Muslims are cast as villains. Too often, Labour echoes this narrative. When Reform recently advocated a "cash-for-returns" deal with the Taliban, for instance, the government's instinct was to say it too was exploring the idea. Following an opponents' framing, rather than dictating the terms of the debate, is a recipe for decline.

Labour's proudest moments were not born of timidity, but of courage: from decriminalising homosexuality and abortion to the advances towards equality of opportunity after 1997 with policies like Sure Start. This government, too, must tell a hopeful national story. One of ambition, not decline. Growth, yes; but growth that raises communities and funds shared spaces where people come together. Delivery, yes; but delivery that people can see in every town, with infrastructure that makes life easier and more fulfilling. Patriotism, yes; but an inclusive, progressive patriotism that tells a more optimistic story than Farage ever could.

This will require organisation. The progressive views of the membership are not reflected in current party structures; neither do they always coalesce into majorities at conference. We cannot afford to retreat into factional grudges. We need an alliance of the left, the soft left, social liberals and trade unionists – a broad, progressive coalition to reestablish our party firmly in a tradition of equality, solidarity, and freedom.

Labour in government has always meant real, tangible change. This legacy is at risk if we fail to resist the tide of social conservatism. It is time to stand firm, defend social liberalism within our movement, and set out the hopeful, inclusive national story Britain desperately needs. **F**

# Next phase

## Labour has cleaned up the Tories' mess — now we will build a fairer country, writes *Ellie Reeves MP*

*Ellie Reeves MP is the solicitor general and the chair of the NEC*

After years of opposition and just over a year in power, our Labour movement is gathering in Liverpool for its second conference back in government. For the Fabian Society – Labour's longest-standing affiliated thinktank – this will be a chance to help shape the next phase of renewal and to bring forward bold ideas. This conference is a crucial moment: not only to reflect on the progress we've made, but to chart the course for what comes next.

As we look back on the past year in government, it's important to remember the scale of the challenges we inherited. After 14 years of reckless Conservative mismanagement, we faced an economy in tatters, an NHS on life support and a deep erosion of public trust in politics. Restoring stability wasn't optional; it was essential. That meant acting quickly to steady the economy, end austerity, and take the tough decisions that had been ducked for too long.

But while we focused on fixing the foundations, we also demonstrated that Labour delivers on its promises. In opposition, we promised 2m extra NHS appointments; in our first year of government, we have delivered over 4.5m. We committed to the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation and followed through within our first 100 days. Free breakfast clubs have opened in hundreds of communities, supporting children and easing pressure on working families. Unfair bonuses for water bosses polluting our rivers have been banned, and the publicly owned GB Energy is up and running, investing in clean, homegrown power. We have also delivered the largest increase in defence spending since the last Labour government, lifted the minimum wage for over 3 million of the lowest-paid workers, and maintained the triple lock, delivering a £450 increase for pensioners.

It is a strong start – but we are under no illusions that there is much more to do. If the focus of our first year was cleaning up the Tories' mess, the second year of this Labour government marks a new phase, one focused squarely on building a fairer country and improving living standards. The June spending review was a bridge into this second phase, including through investment in the public services that are most important to working people.

For too many people, working hard and doing the right thing has not brought the security they deserve. And for too long, working people have been promised a better future that never seems to come. That's why we are investing in every region and nation that makes up our great country, ensuring that opportunity is available to all. That's why we are building 1.5m new homes to restore the lost promise of home ownership for future generations. That's why we are doing everything to drive down waiting lists to ensure the NHS is there for you when you need it. And that's why we are putting 13,000 additional police on the streets so that everyone can feel safe in their local community. As we look to the next election, our goal is clear: to deliver on these promises and secure a second term to bring about a decade of national renewal – rebuilding pride, fairness, and opportunity across Britain. But before then, we have important elections in 2026 across the country, and the political terrain is shifting rapidly. The threat we face is no longer just from the Conservative party, but also from Reform, a party that votes against workers' rights, threatens our NHS, and whose plans risk hundreds of thousands of jobs in the clean energy sector. We must fight for every vote, every seat and every community so that we can carry on delivering the renewal Britain needs. To do that, we must harness the full strength of our party. That means modernising how we campaign, equipping members with the tools and skills they need, and creating space for everyone to play their part.

The knowledge, commitment, and campaigning experience of Fabians will be crucial to supporting our efforts and securing success in 2026 and beyond. At its core, the Labour movement has always been about dignity, fairness, and the belief that we can achieve more together than alone. Since its founding, the Fabian Society has championed these values.

While there have been difficult moments over the past year, we must never forget that Labour exists to improve the lives of working people. That is the promise we stand for and the purpose that drives us.

One year into government, we have started to turn the page on Conservative decline. This conference is our moment to come together and write the next chapter, united in our vision and prepared for what is to come. **F**

# Cut to the quick

## The government must invest more in short-term solutions to our energy crisis, writes *Lucy Shaw*

*Lucy Shaw is the founder of Gordon Management, an investment firm specialising in energy, infrastructure, and climate in the UK and abroad. She previously worked at Blackstone, the IFC, and Actis and studied an MBA and MPA/ID at Harvard University*

Labour has four years left to deliver on its ambition to make Britain "a clean energy superpower." There is no time to waste. The Reform and Conservative parties have identified net-zero as the villain behind the high cost of living. Voters will be more confident in Labour's clean energy agenda if it lowers bills and creates jobs. Nuclear features heavily in the government's budget, and could create 10,000 jobs during construction, but it cannot deliver lower bills in the next four years. Existing solutions can. As such, the government should rebalance its support to more short-term options to capture this opportunity.

The UK's high energy prices were a major 2024 election issue. Energy prices spiked after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, increasing domestic and industrial power prices by 80 per cent and 90 per cent respectively from 2021 to 2023. British industrial energy prices remain the highest in the G7. Even before the war, analysts identified gas as the major culprit of rising energy costs, and renewable energy as the antidote.

Labour committed to change, initially planning £28bn of investment in the green economy during their first term. By February 2024, this pledge was slashed to £15bn, with just over half allocated specifically to energy.

The government's flagship energy policy was to create Great British (GB) Energy, an £8.3bn vehicle to invest in clean energy projects. Its design and mandate before the election was vague, though it hoped to fund projects at a lower capital cost than the private sector, generate profits for taxpayers, and stimulate local jobs. It was unclear whether it could actually reduce costs because it did not deal with key bottlenecks like planning, risked crowding out private investment in traditional renewable technologies, and did not address major components of energy bills like transmission, distribution, supply, taxes, and subsidies.

One year on, GB Energy has not yet gained momentum. It has already lost 30 per cent of its funding since its launch, with £2.5bn reallocated to the nuclear industry. It was styled as a state-owned investor, but its first transaction was a £110m grant program to buy solar panels. This generates savings for schools and the NHS but does not showcase GB Energy's deal-making capabilities. GB Energy's focus on smaller community projects might make its work visible at a local level, but it is unlikely to meaningfully impact bills. Meanwhile, GB Energy's mandate to invest in energy supply chains and nascent technologies could benefit local manufacturing and industry without offering any short- or medium-term savings to consumers.

In parallel, the government has made a big bet on nuclear: more than seven times as much as the commitment to GB Energy. As of July 2025, the government had pledged over £45bn to nuclear in the form of grants, equity, and debt. This includes a tender for the first small modular reactors (SMRs) in the UK (£2.5bn, reallocated from GB Energy), the Sizewell C power plant (£40.35bn) and nuclear fusion research (£2.5bn).

**As of July 2025, the government had pledged over £45bn to nuclear in the form of grants, equity, and debt**

While nuclear may be necessary to diversify the UK's energy mix and improve energy security, it cannot deliver cost savings in time for the next election. Sizewell C will bring an additional 3.2 gigawatts of capacity online, enough to power six million homes, but not until the mid 2030s at the earliest. It will add £12 per year to every energy bill until construction is finished, and its eventual cost per unit is not yet known. For comparison, the government's investment could fund at least twenty-four times as much solar capacity, and almost ten times as much onshore wind, with far shorter construction times.

Nuclear fusion, similarly, has long been the holy grail of unlimited clean energy, but is not expected to lead to

Trident13 at English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0

a viable project within the next 25 years. SMRs are touted as the cheaper, quicker alternative to large scale projects, yet so far only a couple of commercial projects have been commissioned. The government is unlikely to deliver any nuclear projects, let alone accompanying cost savings, before the next election.

If the government wants to win support for Britain's clean energy future, it will need to make more near-term bets. Solar, wind, and battery projects in the UK have shorter development and construction times than nuclear: as low as two years for solar and batteries and four years for onshore wind. The private sector is willing to fund these projects, but grid connections have historically delayed their progress by five years on average. If these projects could be guaranteed grid connections, they could start delivering cheaper energy. The government needs to continue progressing on less visible reforms to grid planning and ensure grid upgrades are funded from private and public sources.

If the government wants to win support for Britain's clean energy future, it will need to make more near-term bets

Reusing undervalued regional assets like shuttered power plants could partially help to reduce the pressure on grid connections. The land from former coal plants could be remediated and converted to clean energy, making use of existing infrastructure. Some plants have already been converted from coal to gas, others to biofuels, but conversion to cheaper renewable energy sources has lagged. The most famous conversion, Drax, will cost the government over £10bn in subsidies from 2015 to 2026.

The Aberthaw power plant could be a blueprint for such redevelopments. The Cardiff Capital Region is funding the demolition and remediation of this former coal plant and taking advantage of its strategic location to create a sustainability hub. Long-term bets on tidal power offshore from the site can be complemented with lower-risk investments in batteries and solar that could generate jobs and income for the community within just a few years. The site could also host other infrastructure like data centres, heat networks, and EV charging. The UK government could help to kickstart development at similar sites.

Another novel approach is to use software and hardware in homes and businesses to optimise energy consumption. A government mandate has ensured 66 per cent of UK's electricity and gas meters are 'smart', yet the benefits of this technology have not yet been realised. Smart meters can save people money by helping them to shift consumption to the cheapest times of day, but most electricity plans in the UK do not offer a dynamic pricing option. Octopus Energy offers lower electric vehicle (EV) tariffs for charging at the cheapest times of day. It has also piloted a product which pays customers to turn off their EV chargers at times when the electricity grid is constrained. These innovations could be extended beyond EVs; in the future, we could even see two-way electricity flows, enabling EVs and home batteries to charge up during periods of high renewable electricity production and then supply power back to the grid when needed. The government could play a role in supporting pilot programs and their scale-up, or even mandating that providers offer flexible pricing options.

Wind, solar, and batteries are less expensive and faster to deploy than nuclear power. Approaches like reusing existing assets and complementing investments with optimisation software could also give clean power an extra boost to deliver savings in the next few years. Labour cannot afford to wait until the mid-2030s to show progress on bringing down energy bills. Placing too much faith, and funding, in nuclear energy and other long-term technology investments risks costing Labour the next election. F

# Crux of the matter

## Fixing our broken democracy must be an immediate priority, argues *Stephen Carter*

*Stephen Carter is a writer, researcher and policy expert, and former special advisor to the mayor of South Yorkshire. He is a board member of Unlock Democracy*

Amid all the challenges facing Labour and the country, the state of our democracy may seem a second order, second-term priority. The system delivered a Labour government. Why mess with it?

But the state of our political infrastructure is not just a matter of democratic ideals. It is a matter of national security: an essential defence against both long-term decline and much more immediate attacks. Political infrastructure is critical infrastructure, even more than our roads or our defence industry. And amid proliferating threats, it is increasingly unfit for purpose.

The first sign of the rot is a crisis of faith. Almost 80 per cent of us now believe our political system could be seriously improved. Only 22 per cent have confidence in parliament. Just 13 per cent trust the media – among the very lowest internationally. Trust in the civil service, police, and judiciary is higher, but has still fallen substantially. Those most desperate for positive change – like the economically struggling and Brexit supporters– are the most likely to feel disempowered. Incredibly, more than half of young people think the UK should be ruled by a dictator.

The problem is that there is some justification for this cynicism. Our first past the post voting system is deeply unrepresentative, effectively disenfranchising almost three-quarters of voters and regularly handing parties solid majorities on little over a third of the vote. Last time, Labour profited; next time it may well be Reform.

Parliament has its own issues. It has less ability to hold the government to account or set its agenda than similar legislatures. Worse, governments increasingly bypass it entirely through so-called Henry VIII powers. With the UK still more centralised than almost any comparable country, regional or local governments cannot provide enough of a counterbalance.

The problems go beyond structural issues. Our democracy is undermined by an insidious lobbying industry and gaps in funding rules which allowed the Tories to receive millions from Russia-linked donors even after 2022 (and could allow Elon Musk to pump millions into Reform). The media is no better. Three companies essentially control our newspapers; a handful of billionaire owners dominate social media. Regulators are failing to adequately counter the threat of creeping "Fox News-ification" of broadcast media. Libel lawfare has increasingly stifled smaller operators, while local journalism – relatively trusted and crucial to healthy communities – has suffered huge declines.

**Our democracy is undermined by an insidious lobbying industry and gaps in funding rules which allowed the Tories to receive millions from Russia-linked donors even after 2022 (and could allow Elon Musk to pump millions into Reform)**

Social media might partly explain the global rise in right-wing populism. Even as we slip into information silos and the very concept of truth bleeds out of public discourse, Zuckerberg is redefining fact-checking as censorship. It is clear that self-regulation has failed.

These flaws in our democracy undermine us in two critical ways, interlinked and mutually reinforcing: they mean we make worse policy, and they leave our politics itself more open to the viruses of charlatanism, populism and outright subversion as trust and engagement decline (not least as a result of that aforementioned bad policy).

If we could ever afford the luxury of these weaknesses, we cannot now. Our political immune system is compromised just as it faces virulent new threats. First, our era increasingly confronts us with existential challenges – ones that need us to make difficult decisions and confront deep special interests. From the climate crisis to public finances, they are testing our politics, and the stakes are incredibly high. Second, our democracy itself is under unprecedented pressure from multiple directions. Russia, Iran and others are aggressively working to manipulate our social media and undermine our politics. Russia, especially, has attempted to subvert referendums and elections in the UK, US, and Europe. China has hacked our electoral commission. This is not incidental harassment: it is a deliberate strategy to use our political vulnerabilities to break us by both exploiting waning trust in politics and seeking to fuel it. It is the frontline of a de facto cold war.

Even more worrying is America's vertigo-inducing abandonment of its role as a standard-bearer – however flawed and inconsistent – of democracy. Rather than countering rising global populism, Trump actively encourages it. the British version of that rising populism is the other threat to our security. This is partly about the policies populists seem to favour – in Trump's case, embracing dictators, tearing up alliances, destabilising economies, and gutting intelligence expertise and scientific research. But there also a qualitatively different threat, to democracy itself.

Trump is systematically attacking checks on his power, from the Federal Reserve to Congress itself. He literally has troops on the streets. We must not be naïve about his agenda. Would a British Trump do something similar? Maybe not. Whatever happens here will not be a carbon copy – and there are countervailing forces in both countries, not least the deep unpopularity of populist policies when they are actually implemented. But our populists explicitly emulate Trump, and think tanks close to them are pushing Project 2025-style plans to remove checks on government. We must not be naïve about their agenda either.

Boris Johnson already showed us the fragility of our constitutional guardrails – so reliant on convention – in the face of a brazen leader. Only tradition prevents a PM from, say, appointing a thousand new peers to take over the Lords. And FPTP can hand a populist the keys to our celebrated 'elective dictatorship' with frightening ease compared to proportional representation. On present polling, that is exactly what will happen. It may all fade away – or it may be worse than we fear. But either way, the risk is more than enough to demand action.

So what do we do? We certainly need to tell a better story. But to counter populism merely by more eloquently defending the status quo is to court irrelevancy and defeat – because however dressed up in hate and lies, demagogues could not find the audience they have done without tapping into real issues and fears. Those include both direct frustrations – from stagnating incomes to unaffordable housing – and the underlying sense of disempowerment cutting across them. A compelling narrative needs to address these issues with substance, credibility, and courage. We do not need mindless radicalism, but we do need to be bold – carefully and rigorously – where boldness is needed.

Populists attract support because they promise action. Progressives need that same reputation. And a progressive alternative would have the great advantage of being a genuine attempt to tackle the problems we face, rather than a con which empowers plutocrats while making ordinary people worse off.

**For Labour especially, democratic reforms represent both a golden chance to create a truly lasting legacy – by changing the system, not just the policies – and that rare gem: a powerful intervention that is essentially free**

While the need for action covers many areas, political reform is arguably the most important for three reasons: because the better policy needed to address other problems is only sustainable (or even possible) with better politics; because the visceral sense of disempowerment behind 'take back control' is the most potent fuel of populism, and the overarching heart of its message; and because there is an immediate practical need to strengthen safeguards against undemocratic power grabs.

For Labour especially, democratic reforms represent both a golden chance to create a truly lasting legacy – by changing the system, not just the policies – and that rare gem: a powerful intervention that is essentially free. They will need to address three great areas of weakness: our formal democratic structures, the wider problems of money and influence, and the information environment. Structural reform should include a more representative voting system, strengthening the Commons, renewing the Lords with regional and national representation, reforming the appointments of peers, and stronger devolution. Wider reform should include tighter transparency requirements for think tanks and substantially stronger lobbying and funding rules: in short, getting money out of politics.

Fixing the information environment poses real dilemmas, but at a minimum, we need stronger moderation requirements, stronger consequences for clear-cut abuses, a reinforced Press Complaints Commission, and reformed ownership rules. We should also emulate EU protections like the Digital Services Act and actively promote media literacy as Finland does.

This is a broad, challenging agenda – as broad and challenging as the problem we face. There is plenty of room for debate on the details. But it is hardly rocket science.

The first step, though, is a fundamental change in mentality. Strengthening our political system is not something we can afford to delay. It is a matter of national security in both the short and the long term – a response to a danger as urgent and organised as any since 1945. It is time we treated it as such. **F**

# Beyond transparency

## Clarity around political gifts and donations is valuable – but not enough, write *Alex Parsons and Julia Cushion*

*Alex Parsons is the democracy lead at mySociety, which runs the websites TheyWorkForYou and WhatDoTheyKnow*

*Julia Cushion is the policy and advocacy manager at mySociety, which runs the websites TheyWorkForYou and WhatDoTheyKnow*

When it comes to trust in politics, there is much that could be done to improve transparency around MPs' financial interests. But transparency alone is not enough. If we are to rebuild faith in our democratic system, we need tighter rules around what sort of activity is permissible – and, consequently, to explore new ways of funding politics.

One of the things we want to achieve through TheyWorkForYou.com is improved information about our representatives' financial interests. After the election, we worked with a group of volunteers to go through the Register of Members' Financial Interests (RMFI) for all MPs – aiming to add context and links for improved analysis. What we found illustrated the limits of transparency alone in bringing change.

The register's initial creation, and subsequent waves of improvement, were both in response to scandals that brought specific MPs, and parliament in general, into disrepute. Increased transparency represented a big concession, but it was also a conscious move to avoid more restrictive rules – specifically, enforcement through new laws and outside agencies.

Improved transparency has value. However, in a perverse way, it can muddy the waters. Some politicians argue that so long as their interests have been "disclosed" they have been implicitly approved. Scandals sit completely in the open until a sudden mood shift makes them a problem.

The idea of "the electorate" is often used as cover for unethical activity. The argument runs that re-elected MPs have had their outside interests endorsed by the voters. This is despite the fact that, when asked, the public clearly supports stronger independent standards and fairly hard limits on second jobs.

**Some politicians argue that so long as their interests have been 'disclosed' they have been implicitly approved. Scandals sit completely in the open until a sudden mood shift makes them a problem**

All of this leaves us with the status quo: a half-hearted approach to transparency which is unsatisfying in practice, and, when it works, mostly just accentuates that parliamentary rules are massively out of sync with what the public thinks should be allowed.

### Improving the data

A key problem our volunteers found was poor data quality. We knew we would need to supplement the RMFI with manual research. But what we learned is that, even with supplementary research and analysis by volunteers, a lot of data is unfixable. Some questions that seemed relatively straightforward – such as "which MPs currently have second jobs?" – turned out to be difficult to answer because of gaps or contradictory disclosures in different fields. In this specific case, we found a recurring problem: income being declared when the MP was first prompted to complete the register after the election, but not being updated afterwards, leaving huge amounts of income information out of date.

Fixing this demands an institutional focus on data quality. Parliament needs to stop treating poor quality disclosures as merely problematic for individual members and instead recognise their effect on the standing of the institution as a whole. Poor compliance with the rules contributes to a negative spiral of lower standards and lower public trust. Clerks should feel empowered by the collective support of MPs, most of whom want the system to work, and support them to make good declarations – including prompts for updates – and have clearer validation rules and rejection standards for poor-quality declarations.

## Tighter standards for disclosure

Building on better data, we need tighter rules for disclosure. This is clearest when it comes to gifts and freebies, where standards for disclosure are out of sync with wider good practice and public expectations. We need a lower floor for disclosure, and the idea that there are some gifts it is inappropriate to accept.

The current £300 limit before a gift needs to be declared is too high. As (now former) MP Scott Benton told an undercover reporter: "you'd be amazed at the number of times I've been to [the] races and the ticket comes to £295". A lot of expensive gifts can plausibly be priced at under £300. In some areas, councillors have far stricter rules on disclosures than MPs, with Merton council requiring gifts of £25 or greater to be registered.

This high limit creates a substantial missing data problem – one which means we often don't feel we can be confident in saying :"this MP didn't receive any freebies". To pick on one example, in June, one MP declared a pair of football tickets valued at £580 – and because of this, needed to retrospectively declare a £110 ticket received in April, since the limit applies to all gifts from the same source. If things had panned out differently, we simply wouldn't know about the smaller donation. The data is missing all these smaller, undeclared gifts – the sum of which could be huge.

It is not just that the threshold is too high; there is also the fact that there is nothing in the rules about gifts it would be inappropriate to accept. In contrast, guidance for civil servants is much more rooted in offences under the Bribery Act. The code of conduct for MPs should be revised to lower the declaration limit and introduce guidelines around whether MPs should accept certain types of gift at all.

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## Funding politics

When you start chasing the problem of bad data, you inevitably end up face to face with the issue of how we fund politics. The scale of gifts and freebies is minute compared to the large donations made to parties and candidates. The problem is that we will struggle to introduce donor caps or stronger conflict of interest rules so long as a major way we fund the democratic system is via large donations.

The UK is an outlier in both European and anglophone countries in having very little public funding for politics. Letting the rich pick up the bill is a false economy if the influence they receive in return is to our disadvantage. If we want politics to work in the public interest, we collectively need to pay for it.

This is not massively popular – but then again, neither is our current system, and in public attitudes work, funding becomes more popular when the problem of big donors is raised. A range of different approaches need to be explored if we are to find an approach that is right for the UK. Rather than European-style direct subsidisation of parties, Canada might be a good example to pull from, with top-ups of small donations and reimbursement for campaign spending.

In other areas, increases in existing public subsidies, such as short money and policy development grants, would remove a dependence on external secondees for opposition policy development. These measures, in combination with spending and donor caps, would control costs and help us shut big money out of politics.

## Pushing for change

We think that there are other changes that could improve transparency from the outside and empower reformers on the inside to go further.

At a basic level, more could be done to get parliament to follow and enforce its existing rules by flagging invalid disclosures for correction and connecting datasets to make under-disclosure in debates and parliamentary questions more visible. Making sure information about MPs accepting freebies is easily accessible could help keep the pressure on for rule changes.

On the question of public funding, the lack of public support is often presented as a major obstacle, but is often merely cover for a lack of progress. To shift the dial, we need to build a better view of public attitudes on the various options and trade-offs. Our view is that this is a problem a citizens' assembly would be well equipped to handle. Deliberative democracy is a useful anti-corruption device since it avoids the conflicts of interest present when politicians set their own rules; it also produces more nuanced views than polling.

While ideally an assembly would be commissioned by parliament itself, it does not have to be – and it would have a lot of value if convened by civil society to move the debate forward. Sharper information about public preferences – and, importantly, trade-offs – would help inform wider campaigning and civic action. Joining civic power to deliberative democracy would provide power in one direction, and legitimacy in the other – a powerful combination. **F**

# A crucial tool

## The government can utilise existing data to tackle domestic violence, argues *Erin Sanders-McDonagh*

*Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh is a senior lecturer in criminology at the University of Kent. Her research focuses on violence, including domestic violence and domestic homicide. She is also a Labour candidate for the Colindale North ward in Barnet*

The House of Commons report, Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, was published on 16 May. It does not offer anything particularly new for anyone who has been paying even scant attention to the increasing number of women and girls in the UK affected by violence. The report reviews the same issues, and asks the same questions, that have been reviewed and asked *ad nauseum* since the 2011 VAWG Action Plan was published. There was, at least, some attention paid to domestic violence specifically, and a clear acknowledgement both that domestic violence (DV) is increasing across the UK and that and local services are stretched, often beyond breaking point.

Overall, the report does a good job at making clear what needs to be done to tackle DV: primarily, a sustained increase in ring-fenced funding. After 15 years of austerity, however, the level of funding needed will be impossible to deliver in the short-term, especially because the damage left in the wake of massive public spending cuts goes far beyond violence against women and girls (VAWG). The savage dismantling of services for some of the most vulnerable in our society means that difficult decisions must be made about to how to fund almost every essential service on the brink of collapse, including the NHS, schools, and prisons. It will take many years to rebuild what has been neglected for so long, and that includes DV services.

Knowing this, most DV organisations were not surprised that the June 2025 spending review failed to deliver anything close to what is required to tackle DV. Addressing issues like housing and NHS services will certainly help, but given the financial constraints that the Labour party have been forced to deal with, it is increasingly clear that solutions to these issues must, at least in the short term, be more strategic. What can be done with limited spending to better understand the underlying causes of DV, and create effective strategies that may provide more efficient and effective interventions in the future?

One key area where the report's authors focus much of their critique relates to the failures of the Home Office to deliver effective interventions to address DV and VAWG. The Home Office has had a great deal of involvement in developing the VAWG agenda and funding initiatives to tackle things like DV. Given its important role, it was extremely disturbing to find the Home Office explicitly acknowledging in the report that its departments "do not have a strong understanding of what works to tackle violence against women and girls". It has failed to work collaboratively with other departments, failed to oversee and manage spending on VAWG, and somehow managed to underspend an average of 15 per cent of its allocated budget for VAWG between 2021 and 2023 despite VAWG increasing year-on-year.

**The Home Office has, at its fingertips, 602 reports so rich with material that a meta-analysis could provide some of the most important British research on domestic violence**

The report makes several suggestions for how the Home Office needs to adapt and make changes going forward, but importantly, it also makes clear they should first use existing evidence to increase their understanding of these issues. This seems reasonable, except that the Home Office suggested it would publish a new VAWG strategy this summer. Given the complexity of the task and their admitted paucity of understanding, a *festina lente* – 'more haste, less speed' – approach would be wiser here.

Going forward, other arms of government could be given an increased role, as suggested by Dr Purna Sen

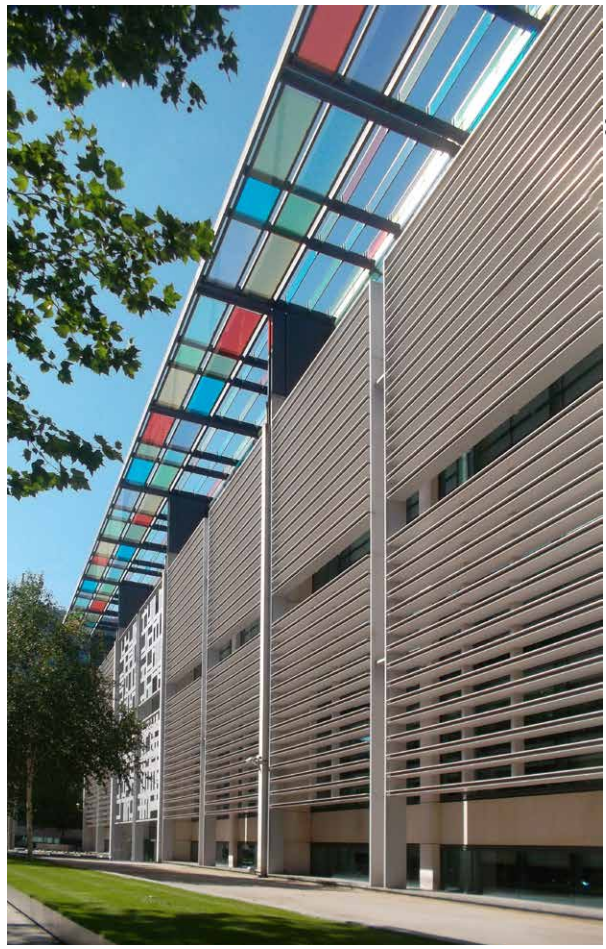
and Dr Sara Hyde in their May 2025 Fabian pamphlet. They argue that a more coordinated approach is needed, and suggest setting up cross-ministerial and cross-departmental teams to review how to build maximum transparency, including regarding allocation of funds. A new Independent National Council on VAWG would provide oversight on key areas including monitoring, evaluation, and feedback on new strategies.

The Labour party made a clear commitment to halve violence against women within 10 years. If that target is going to be met, new strategies and approaches are needed. However, with so much to tackle and with relatively few resources to do so effectively, it makes sense to consider what evidence already exists that might provide important insights into the increase in VAWG. Important, then, that the Home Office has at its fingertips 602 reports on DV, so rich with material that analysing and publishing a meta-analysis of these reports has the potential to be one of the most important pieces of research to ever emerge from the UK on domestic violence.

Under section 9(4) of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004, a domestic homicide review (DHR) is a review of any circumstances in which the death of a person aged 16 or over has, or appears to have, resulted from violence, abuse or neglect by a person to whom they were related or with whom they were, or had been, in an intimate personal relationship, or a member of the same household as themselves. Since 2011, there has been a statutory requirement for local areas to carry out DHRs, which are compulsory multi-agency reviews of deaths considered to be the result of domestic abuse, compiled into comprehensive reports that must be sent to the Home Office.

A centralised database of these DHRs is publicly available and includes all 602 reports produced by local authorities. DHRs are robust – some stretching to 100 pages or more – and provide insights into the complex and varied issues that have led to a domestic homicide. They include an incredible amount of detail – in particular, information on every agency involved with the victim or perpetrator and details about how violence escalated to homicide, especially in cases where victims were known to the police or social services as being at high risk for homicide. Each review provides an internal analysis of how the victim was failed; reports investigate the involvement of the police, social workers, NHS practitioners, DV organisations, schools, and even the UK Border Agency. Each is asked: how could you have done more? How could you have done better? Each DHR also includes an action plan and gives some insight into what needs to be done to prevent another domestic homicide happening in the local area. Excluding a basic 2013 report on some of the first DHRs, little serious analysis has been performed using this database. This is a failure which does not do justice to the victims whose lives have been lost to violence.

To add insult to injury, a 2024 report published by the LGA, the Domestic Homicide Review Survey, highlighted the costs related to conducting DHRs. Nearly 200 respondent authorities revealed they spent a total of £1m on DHRs in 2022/23, 45 per cent more than in 2021/22. This is a huge cost to local authorities at a time when we need cost-effectiveness. A meta-analysis of these 602 reports would make good use of already-spent public funds.



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The same LGA report shows that, between 2018 and 2023, the number of DHRs undertaken increased by 76 per cent. This reflects what we already know about the increase in fatal violence against women; analysing these reports will give insights into the reasons behind increasing levels of violence. This data may also offer cost savings if new insights can be used to help streamline strategies or focus on targeted interventions to address VAWG.

Robust analysis of DHR reports would make clear where – and perhaps why – current policies are failing. It would enable funding to be maximised so that it reaches victims when they need it, before it is too late to help them. It would also give a detailed insight into when, where and how services are getting it right. Done well, a report from the Home Office analysing this dataset would be a lodestone for future policy and funding work on DV in the UK and internationally relevant to scholars and policymakers working on this area.

This is an important opportunity for Labour to deliver something truly meaningful in understanding DV. The House of Commons report calls for the Home Office to do more, to do better, and to make changes. Let it start here – and make some progress on an issue all agree is of fundamental importance for stopping VAWG. **F**

# In partnership

## Top-down enforcement is not the way to tackle violence, writes *Lib Peck*

*Lib Peck has been the director of the mayor of London's Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) since its establishment in 2019. It pioneers a partnership-based, public health approach to tackling violence rooted in prevention. She was previously the leader of Lambeth council – the first female leader for over 20 years*

Last week, the mayor of London launched Holiday Hope – a £2m campaign to reach young people during the school holidays, which is a time when they are less safe and more likely to get caught up in violence. The premise was simple: to give them something to do, something to aspire to, and something to eat. In the same week, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published the crime statistics for the year.

Not for the first time, I was confronted with the dissonant realities of, on the one hand, creative and dedicated youth workers protecting and inspiring young people; and, on the other, Trumpian-inspired headlines that screamed that London was the murder capital of the world. This dichotomy has been ever-present since I was appointed to lead the mayor's newly-established Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) six years ago.

How can we advocate for a positive prevention agenda delivering impact and change in the face of such negative, scare-mongering headlines that push politicians down a narrow, enforcement-based route? We need to carve out this space, socially and politically. Away from the headlines, the truth is more nuanced. The ONS recorded a 9.5 per cent increase in London knife crime, but violence against the person is down by 6 per cent year-on-year. You are less likely to be a victim of violence in London than elsewhere in the UK, and murder rates in London are lower than in big cities in the US (not to mention Berlin, Barcelona, and Paris).

What is arguably more significant for the VRU – which focuses on preventing violence affecting young people – is that by the end of 2024 there had been a 40 per cent reduction in hospital-based admissions for under-25s compared to the VRU's initiation in 2018/19, a 12-year record low of teenage homicides, and the lowest number of under-25s murdered since 2003.

However, there is danger in trading statistics. They can mask the horror of violence: the bereft family, devastated friends, and scared and scarred communities. Last year, 11 young Londoners were killed – 11 lives, full of potential, cut short. In a compassionate society, the impact of violence should never be normalised.

I am privileged to spend time with young people. The mantra of our Young People's Action Group – 'nothing about us without us' – is integral to the VRU's approach. What they relay is a picture of a complex and challenging environment: the lack of opportunity and the lure of quick money; fears of travelling to different parts of London; online influencers fuelling misogyny; high levels of anxiety leading to disengagement from school, and, sadly, young people carrying knives for protection. These problems often play out over decades in neighbourhoods that suffer the toxic trio of long-term drivers of violence – poverty, alienation and deprivation – which breed intergenerational trauma.

A few years ago, the VRU commissioned a report on violence across London's neighbourhoods. Its sobering conclusion: the affected neighbourhoods would have been broadly the same 100 years ago. So what is to be done?

First, we must make good on the government's commitment to a national, long-term strategy to combat poverty. The mayor is one of the largest funders of activities and services for young people, reaching 450,000 young Londoners (and 150,000 parents/carers, youth workers and teachers) through the VRU alone. But without national investment, and with essential services crippled by years of austerity, working to reduce violence will always feel like swimming against the tide.

Second, targeted investment is needed in neighbourhoods enduring decades of intergenerational trauma and violence. That includes parts of London. While the capital's streets may be paved with gold in the popular consciousness, London has 11 of England's 50 most deprived local authorities.

Third, the government's mission to halve knife crime requires a bold national prevention strategy that is not afraid to embrace what works and to stick with it. That means going deeper than commissioning knife bins and metal detectors – which are ultimately sticking plasters – and


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going further than single-year funding settlements, which do not build sustainable intervention models.

Instead, funding should be directed towards programmes that already hold positive relationships with young people, and the focus should be on the partnerships that enable and empower those interventions. Here, the past six years have proved inspiring and impactful. Backed by three-year funding from the Home Office and steadfast commitment from the mayor of London, we have led and enabled transformational change. Shaped by young Londoners and informed by evidence, the VRU partnership has charted moments of transition and opportunity for young people, confronting challenges such as race and gender, to develop universal interventions in early settings such as primary schools and targeted interventions at critical moments such as in custody suites, with much in between.

The results are impressive. Targeted oracy lessons for infants struggling with communication have substantially narrowed the skill gap with their peers, with teachers reporting children using words over fists in the playground. Healthy relationship training for 20,000 secondary school children means 80 per cent of kids can spot a red flag in a relationship.

Providing one-to-one mentors to over 800 pupils excluded from mainstream schools (now in pupil referral units) is having an impact, with 82 per cent of schools reporting increased attendance. This is particularly significant given research stating that teenagers permanently excluded from school are twice as likely to commit serious violence within a year of expulsion.

Funding targeted youth workers in 12 London hospitals and 12 London custody suites has already reached 31,000 young people at "reachable, teachable" moments, with a 70 per cent reduction in harm for patients, and nearly 80 per cent of under-18s arrested for violent offences not reoffending in the following 12 months.

These interventions all rely on a positive relationship between a young person and skilled and culturally competent adult or peer. Someone who can build trust, provide support, nurture confidence, and encourage aspiration, and who adapts to the young person's specific needs without the constraint of a predefined support period. Essentially, someone who is on their side.

Because everything hinges on relationships, partnerships are key. During a recent visit to our award-winning MyEnds project in Brixton, a local organisation reminded the policing minister of a simple truth: those who live and work in a neighbourhood best understand its challenges and solutions. They also have the credibility to connect with young people. Partnerships between grassroots organisations can centre different services around young people's needs – be it therapy, family outreach, or school support. Partnerships thrive when backed up by long-term, non-competitive funding. The challenge for the government is to let go, determine the outcome without overengineering the process, and avoid nationally driven, centrally commissioned programmes that too often undermine vital local ecosystems.

Partnerships with local authorities are equally important. Councils can draw together local police, schools and health providers. Together, they build infrastructure, develop local violence and vulnerability plans, and erode the policy silos that brush over how young people experience violence. Knife crime does not sit in one pocket of the community, with violence against women and girls in the other.

The VRU is the regional body with evidenced impact in leading and connecting London in all its glorious complexity – with 32 local authorities, five Integrated Care Boards, and 12 Borough Command Units united around a common London plan. This can enable shared learning and best practice, remove blockages between agencies and communities, and invest – not only in financial terms – in place-based interventions. This would bring depth and breadth to tackling violence, both of which are needed for the government's prevention partnerships to succeed.

We know from our experiences in London that building genuine cross-sector, cross-community partnerships takes time and commitment. Only by leveraging key relationships can we build a national strategy on strong local foundations. Only by having the courage to invest in interventions that address the long-term drivers will we truly transform the landscape of violence. And only by taking the time to listen to young people – rather than reacting to shock headlines – will we change the narrative and uphold the VRU's core belief: that violence is preventable, not inevitable. **F**

# Murky waters

## The threat of Putin's Russia goes far beyond our immediate security, argue *Mark Rusling and Anton Ievsiushkin*

*Mark Rusling is a Labour and Co-operative councillor in Sheffield Brightside & Hillsborough*

*Anton Ievsiushkin is chair of the Sheffield branch of the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain*

"The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters." So wrote Antonio Gramsci from a fascist prison cell. Nearly a century later, the old world – built from the rubble of continental war and genocide – is dead. But new monsters have surely been born.

First among them is Vladmir Putin and his Russian state. The war that Putin launched against Ukraine in 2014, and resumed in 2022, has acted like a block of concrete launched into a murky lake. Though the water is opaque, the tumult on the surface is clear. And while Ukraine has borne the brunt, the whole of Europe is threatened by three concentric waves.

### The inner wave – security

The inner wave is the direct threat that the Russian state poses to British and European security. After Litvinenko, Salisbury, attacks on European ammunition warehouses, plots to blow up DHL aeroplanes and destruction of undersea infrastructure, this danger should be clear. As the heads of MI6 and the CIA have stated, Russia is waging a "reckless campaign of sabotage" across Europe. We are being tested, but this testing is only the start.

Sergey Karaganov has recently set out "what Russia's policy towards the west should be." Its subtitle gives a not-so-subtle clue: 'Breaking Europe's Back'. And our back is to be broken through the threat of nuclear weapons: "any war between Russia and NATO/EU will inevitably become nuclear…if the west continues to fight against us in Ukraine". Karaganov is not some isolated keyboard warrior. He is currently the chairman of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defence Policy.

Professor Karaganov continues: "for every killed Russian soldier, a thousand Europeans will die, if they do not stop indulging their rulers who are waging war against Russia. We need to tell the Europeans directly: your elites

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will make the next portion of cannon fodder out of you". In a twist worthy of Orwell's Ministry of Peace, resistance to invasion is reframed as the waging of war.

Sergei Naryshkin, director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service, makes the same argument: "In the event of aggression by NATO against Russia, the damage will be done, of course, to the entire NATO bloc." Let us do what we want or we will nuke you. Now is the time of monsters.

## The middle wave – alliances

While our security is threatened directly by Russian aggression, the inversion of truth on which Putinism rests is pulling apart the ties that have bound the west since 1945. For most of this year, as Russia bombed playgrounds, residential blocks and hospitals, European governments condemned Putin, whereas the US president blamed Zelenskyy. Although US policy may be shifting as of summer 2025, and Trump now claims to be "disappointed" in Putin, he also claims that he's "not done" with the Russian leader. To date, Putin's arguments and threats have been echoed directly in Trump's language and actions – the inner wave pushes out the middle wave.

Too often, Trump has echoed the rhetoric of the Russian government, which seeks to drive a wedge between Europe and the US. As Professor Karaganov candidly admits: "we do not want to humiliate [the US] and are ready to help ensure their dignified way out of the Ukrainian catastrophe, where the Americans have been dragged by liberal globalists and Europeans." It could almost be JD Vance speaking.

This rupture threatens to bring down the curtain on 80 years of British foreign policy. While we must work with the US where we can, we can no longer claim that we instinctively share the same values or interests as the US. President Trump does not see the UK or Europeans as equals and does not think our interests matter. There are only two leaders in the world that Trump sees as his equals: Xi and Putin.

While Trump will eventually depart – however unwillingly – Maga foreign policy is here to stay. Arguably, it has been quietly building for 20 years. We must adapt to this reality. If British foreign policy is not to be held hostage to a few thousand votes in the American midwest, we have to get serious about Europeans defending Europe – starting with Ukraine. The pledge to reach 2.5 per cent of GDP on defence spending by 2027 is welcome, but only a start. This is clearly in Ukraine's best interests; but it is also in the best interests of the UK.

## The outer wave – the far-right fanboys

In Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell gives his antagonist, O'Brien, two sentences which explain the basis for all despotism. "Whatever the Party holds to be the truth, is truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party." What was true for O'Brien and the Soviet premiers is just as true today for Putin, Trump, and far-right leaders throughout Europe.

Again, Professor Karaganov is open about the Russian elites' thinking: "Peace…can only be established when Europe's back is broken once again, as happened as a result of our victories over Napoleon and Hitler, when there is a change in the generation of the current elites." Putin's putative new generation includes Germany's AfD and France's Le Pen.

Our own Nigel Farage is a little more nuanced – but only a little. As Ukip leader, Farage was asked which world leader he most admired. His answer: "As an operator, but not as a human being, I would say Putin". More recently, he has argued that the EU and NATO provoked Russia by admitting eastern European member states. Like the AfD and Le Pen, he supports Trump, and his comments suggest a tacit belief in 'spheres of influence' – a worldview which ignores the democratic will of citizens in smaller countries. The middle wage pushes out the outer wave.

In this, Farage is out of step with mainstream British opinion – including many of his own supporters. Only 13 per cent of Brits think that the UK should stop supporting Ukraine now. Even a majority of Reform voters (52 per cent) think that Russia is entirely responsible for the war in Ukraine (although this is 20 per cent lower than for Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem voters). Perhaps Farage has more in common with Jeremy Corbyn, who famously hedged over Russia's responsibility for the 2018 novichok poisonings in Salisbury.

**While Trump will eventually depart – however unwillingly – Maga foreign policy is here to stay. Arguably, it has been quietly building for 20 years**

Across Europe, the pro-Putin far right is powered by Russia's online army of conspiracy theory and disinformation-wielding bots. It reveres the strong man – at the human, societal and national levels. It supports Putin's fascist world view which divides the world into peoples worthy of respect and those – like Ukrainians – who are not. And it threatens everything that we cherish on the left.

## Slaying the monsters

Our response must be based on the UK's progressive self-interest. Repelling the three waves unleashed on Europe by Putin is undoubtedly in the interest of Ukraine and the UK. It is probably in the interest of most Russians as well. We must protect British sovereignty and security by supporting the Ukrainian fight against Putin, stepping in where Trump has switched sides. We must adapt to a new world in which our closest ally has, at best, shown indifference to the values which have underpinned our collective security for 80 years. And we must expose the Putin supporters and apologists on the far right whose conspiracy-laden lies undermine our unity, and therefore our security.

The new world is struggling to be born. Much will depend on who acts as midwife: Putin, Trump and their European fellow-travellers? Or the decent European mainstream, which includes our own Labour party? **F**

# A new era

## Fabian women are making a difference across Britain, writes *Christine Megson*

*Christine Megson MBE is the founder and coordinator of the Fabian Women's Network (FWN) mentoring programme*

Alongside Caroline Adams MBE, I have now run the Fabian Women's Network (FWN) mentoring programme for 14 years. Both of us agree that it has truly come of age – entering a new, exciting, and above all influential, phase. Until July last year, we were offering women a political understanding. Now we offer them the power to make change.

Since 2011, we have had 14 cohorts and helped nearly 400 women to achieve their potential. But 13 of those years were in an environment of opposition. Now, with a Labour government in power, we know the 'in-crowd' – and six of our mentees are in it as MPs. We also have two mentees working as special advisers to members of the cabinet.

Previously, we were pushing against a closed door. Now, with people in power who share the Fabian values of equity and social inclusion, the door is wide open.

Our mentees have always made a positive difference to this country, but today it's happening at a far greater pace. One fantastic example of this new influence was a campaign last year – formulated on the programme – by mentee Dr Finella Craig, a palliative care consultant at Great Ormond Street. It captured the attention of the minister for disability and social security, Stephen Timms, and is in the pipeline to become policy. Craig highlighted how Disability Living Allowance (DLA) currently stops the day a child dies, leaving parents who have been full-time carers both bereaved and in economic hardship. She called for them to receive automatic financial support until they feel able to return to work.

In recent months, when we witness change being made in the UK, we are regularly finding Fabian women are at the heart of it – particularly mentees who are now MPs, charity leaders, civil servants or individual campaigners. Though they often have very different roles, they are fighting for the same cause.

Nothing illustrates this spirit of collaboration better than the vote, in June this year, to ensure that women cannot be criminalised for ending their own pregnancies. Emily Batchelor, a mentoring programme graduate who now works for the Faculty of Sexual & Reproductive Healthcare, has been working closely with parliamentarians for many years on the issue. Georgie Nel, another alumni, works for Tonia Antoniazzi MP, who tabled the amendment. In the chamber, mentee – and now MP – Catherine Fookes addressed parliament, encouraging colleagues to support the amendment. Meanwhile, outside speaking to the press was mentee and medical doctor Sonia Adesara, explaining on Sky News why women who are seeking an abortion need to be supported and shown compassion, not prosecuted.

This will not be a one off. The next big collaboration will be around the schools bill, particularly around provision for children with special educational needs (SEND). Alumni like Kiran Gill, CEO and founder of the education charity The Difference, and Anya Sizer, Hackney council's cabinet member for SEND, have spent years lobbying for a greater understanding of special educational needs. In addition, programme graduate Catherine Hinwood, from NHS England, is leading a taskforce on improving services for people with ADHD. She will be using case studies from among our programme's graduates and their children to inform policy.

This is not to say that we didn't achieve change before July 2024; just that it was a lot harder to influence government policy. Now it's a regular occurrence. During the years of Tory government, we had just one mentee elected to parliament – Abena Oppong-Asare. When it came to the 2024 election, however, 16 mentees put themselves forward as prospective Labour candidates. Of these, 14 were chosen, and six were elected as MPs.

While we had limited national influence before 2024, we more than made up for it locally. More than 80 of our mentees became local councillors, and in a historic moment in 2022, four mentees won seats on the same council, Monmouthshire. On taking up her position as council leader, mentee Mary Ann Brocklesby wrote: "This is the first time Monmouthshire has been Labour in a generation and the first council in Wales to be gender balanced. I couldn't have done this without the backing of the Fabian women." In the 2024 general election, these same women helped mentee Catherine Fookes win Monmouthshire from the Conservatives. She defeated the Welsh secretary, David TC Davies.

Since 2011, 12 mentees have become heads of not-for-profit organisations. These include Ivana Bartoletti, who founded the influential Women Leading in AI network, and Sophie Pender, who founded The 93% Club. The latter is the UK's 'least exclusive members club' – open to people educated in state schools.

It is with great satisfaction that I am seeing 14 years of hard work come to fruition. I launched the mentoring programme in 2010 with Seema Malhotra MP, now a minister in the Foreign, Commonwealth and

Development Office, just after the end of the last Labour government. It seemed to us like the right time to support more women into positions of power – in both politics and public life.

My motivation came from personal experience. In the late 1990s, as the principal of Stafford college, I was obliged to give evidence to the education select committee. Despite my years of experience in education, it all felt very alien to me. I walked in blind, with little knowledge of government processes or even what an MP's job entailed. Unsurprisingly, I was taken advantage of. I was made to feel like a political football, kicked between MPs who wanted to keep training subsidies for employers – which benefited our college enormously – and MPs who did not.

Shortly afterwards, I became a mentor for senior leaders at refugee organisations. I saw how the mentoring was boosting confidence and enabling these women to further improve the lives of refugees.

These two experiences formed the basis of the FWN mentoring programme. So began my mission to provide other women with an understanding of how democracy works and how to enact change. I also included training to help boost confidence – there is nothing more demotivating than a harsh inner critic.

On this mission, I was fortunate to be partnered with the incredible Caroline Adams of the parliamentary Labour party. She had worked closely with Tony Blair at Number 10; she has detailed knowledge of how parliament works, and access to the wonderful Labour MPs and peers who have served as some of the 100 mentors on our programme.

Some of our earlier cohorts benefited from being mentored by MPs who are now in the cabinet, including Rachel Reeves, education secretary Bridget Phillipson, science, technology and innovation secretary Liz Kendall, and Baroness Smith of Basildon. Other high-profile mentors have included safeguarding minister Jess Phillips, Ruth Cadbury MP, Seema Malhotra MP, Baroness Jan Royall and Baroness Glenys Thornton. Former MPs Roberta Blackman-Woods and Meg Munn have also been a continuing source of support for our women.

The FWN mentoring programme has nurtured a tribe of strong, intelligent women. Together, they form an unstoppable force that is transforming the lives of millions for the better. For me, it is never 'mission accomplished,' but "what missions can be accomplished next?" What a privilege it is to be a conduit for so much hope. **F**

# Noticeboard

**FABIAN SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**
Sunday 26 November 2025, 11:30–16:00
Parkgate Hotel, Westgate St
Cardiff CF10 1DA

AGM business:
- Apologies
- Minutes of the 2024 AGM
- Matters arising
- In memoriam
- Chair's report
- General secretary's report
- Reports from Fabian sections
- Treasurer's report
- Approval of annual report 2024/25
- Appointment of auditors
- Jenny Jeger prize for writing
- Date of next AGM
- Any other business

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

The Fabian Society's executive committee will propose the following rule changes at the November Annual General Meeting (AGM). Members are invited to review and consider these motions ahead of the next AGM.

- Motion 1: It is proposed to revise the provision concerning the age of executive committee members under RULE 12 as follows: "Of the ten additional executive committee members elected, at least two shall be under 28 years of age on the date of the forthcoming Annual General Meeting, provided that two such candidates have been duly nominated."
- Motion 2: It is proposed that the section concerning representation of local societies under RULE 12 be updated as follows: "The Society shall also elect by ballot one member of the executive committee to represent local societies. There shall be a separate section on the ballot paper for the election of the member and all full members of the Society shall be en-titled to vote. Nominations for this section shall be limited to currently affiliated local soci-eties. Candidates may nominate themselves or be nominated by a local society which has satisfied itself that the candidate is an active member of that society."
- Motion 3: Rule 15 will be updated to reflect the current membership fees.
- Motion 4 : It is proposed to amend Bye Law 7 to reflect the new age restrictions for The Young Fabians i.e. under 28 years of Age.

These motions will be put to a vote at the forthcoming AGM. All members are encouraged to review the proposed changes and prepare for discussion at the meeting.

# David (Lord) Lipsey
## 1948–2025

*Dianne Hayter* explores the life and work of archetypal Fabian David Lipsey

*Dianne Hayter, Baroness Hayter of Kentish Town is a Labour peer a former general secretary of the Fabian Society*

The most Fabian of Fabians, David Lipsey put his outstanding intellect, deep Labour commitment, journalistic skills and political nous at the service of both the society and the party.

His political activism started as a student when Roger (now Lord) Liddle masterminded his election as chair of the Oxford Labour club. His first job – at the GMWU under the tutelage of Giles (later Lord) Radice, who became a close friend – brought him to the attention of Tony Crosland MP, with whom he established the closest of working relationships, initially in opposition (as a Rowntree-funded "chocolate soldier") and then in government, first at the Department of the Environment and subsequently (until Crosland's death in February 1977) at the Foreign Office, before moving to Number 10 with Jim Callaghan.

According to Julia Langdon, whilst working as a "young government policy wonk," Lipsey set about ensuring that more Labour names were added to the civil service list of the so-called "great and the good." I was a lucky beneficiary when he engineered my appointed to the Royal Commission on Criminal Procedure.

Fabianism was with him throughout, in his writings and as chair during Labour's traumatic period, when many leading Fabians left for the SDP. He had to handle a divided executive – with Tony Benn creating extra difficulties – a ballot on whether to exclude SDP members from full membership, and the tense, decisive November 1981 AGM which implemented the change.

Just before the split, he and former Fabian assistant general secretary Dick Leonard edited The Socialist Agenda: Crosland's Legacy, a collection of essays seeking to take the original Crosland thinking into new times, epitomising the revisionist approach to politics: adaptation and change, but based on the essential values and objectives.

Similarly forward-looking, Lipsey's 1992 Fabian pamphlet The Name of the Rose – written following 13 years in impotent opposition – sought to reconcile Labour's desire to win with its aim of fulfilling the traditional aims and objectives of the left. Lipsey argued that while Labour needed to remain committed to social democratic and egalitarian values, including redistribution, it had to pursue these as long-term rather than immediate objectives, embrace market economics, and move away from active industrial policy. He attributed Labour's electoral failures to a lack of trust in the party's competence and governance. Never a friend of the 'hard left', he took particular aim at those, like Tony Benn, who wanted to move the party leftwards. Provocatively, he even floated the ideas of a limited alliance with the Liberal Democrats, and even a change in the party's name (which later effectively happened with 'New Labour').

David's interests were wide and passionate, whether greyhound and horse racing – even participating in harness-racing – fine wine, or music. His sponsorship of a talented young pianist, the son of his barber, included celebrating his 70th birthday by holding a concert by this prodigy for friends in St John's Smith Square.

Lipsey valued family, friendship and fun, quoting Crosland's call for "personal freedom, happiness and cultural endeavour; the cultivation of leisure, beauty, grace, gaiety, excitement and of all the proper pursuits, whether elevated, vulgar or eccentric, which contribute to the varied fabric of a full private and family life. Total abstinence and a good filing-system are not now the right sign-posts to the socialist Utopia, or at least, if they are, some of us will fall by the wayside."

Susan Crosland records her husband Tony's assessment: "D.Lip marvellous. How did I do without him?". Her own opinion of David was enhanced by his support for women's liberation.

Simon Crine, another general secretary, described him thus: "Good man, huge brain, always supportive, sometime quirky." For myself, a friend and colleague for 55 years, he was a true *mensch*: loyal, amusing, brilliant and entertaining, always thoughtful and wise, and all with a dimpled smile.

His great love of Margaret, his two stepsons and his daughter, and his adored home in Wales, provided a rich hinterland. The last time I saw him and Margaret together was at the press night for the play The Gang of Three, based on Giles Radice's book, Friends and Rivals, about Roy Jenkins, Denis Healey and Tony Crosland. David thoroughly enjoyed the portrayal of "his" Tony and warmly congratulated the play's author, Robert Khan, for capturing him so well.

The Fabians were richer for his contribution, and are poorer for his passing. **F**

# Listings

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

BOURNEMOUTH
Contact Dan Moore: bournemouthfabiansociety@gmail.com

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

CENTRAL LONDON
Contact Dr Michael Weatherburn: michael.weatherburn@gmail.com

CHISWICK & WEST LONDON
Contact Dr Alison Baker: abcontacts46@gmail.com

COLCHESTER
Contact Maurice Austin: maurice.austin@phonecoop.coop

COUNTY DURHAM
Contact Professor Alan Townsend: alan.townsend1939@gmail.com

CROYDON AND SUTTON
Contact Phillip Robinson: probinson525@btinternet.com

DERBY
Contact Lucy Rigby: lucycmrigby@hotmail.com

ENFIELD
Contact Andrew Gilbert: alphasilk@gmail.com

FINCHLEY
Contact Sam Jacobs: samljacobs@outlook.com

GRIMSBY
Contact Dr Pat Holland: hollandpat@hotmail.com

HARINGEY
Contact Sue Davidson: sue.davidson17@gmail.com

HARTLEPOOL
Contact Helen Howson: secretaryhartlepoolfabians@gmail.com

HAVERING
Contact David Marshall: haveringfabians@outlook.com

MERSEYSIDE
Contact Hetty Wood: hettywood@gmail.com

NEWHAM
Contact John Morris: jj-morris@outlook.com

NORTHAMPTON
Contact Mike Reader: mike@mikereader.co.uk

NORTHUMBRIA AREA
Contact Pat Hobson: pathobson@hotmail.com

READING AND DISTRICT
Contact Tony Skuse: tonyskuse2000@yahoo.co.uk

PETERBOROUGH
Contact Jonathan Theobald: jontheo@pm.me

SOUTHAMPTON
Contact: sotonfabians@gmail.com

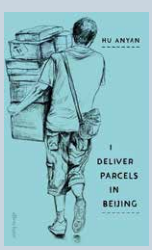
SOUTH TYNESIDE
Contact Paul Freeman: southtynesidefabians@gmail.com

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

**I DELIVER PARCELS IN BEIJING**
*Hu Anyan*




China's astonishing economic progress, particularly from the 1990s onwards, is the defining story of our era. Apart from anything, China's development was responsible for more than three-quarters of the concurrent reduction in extreme poverty worldwide.

Its workers, however, have not been spared the punishing realities of the modern gig economy. In this book, a runaway bestseller in China, Hu Anyan pulls back the curtain on insecure work in his account of 19 different jobs.

**Penguin has kindly given us five copies to give away. To win one, answer the following question:**
*'Socialism with Chinese characteristics' is a term coined by which statesman in 1982? He later became the premier of the People's Republic.*

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

**ANSWERS MUST BE RECEIVED NO LATER THAN 15 OCTOBER 2025.**

# FABIAN SOCIETY
LABOUR PARTY CONFERENCE 2025

# FESTIVAL OF IDEAS

GBS GLOBAL BANKING SCHOOL
BMA
RICS
LLOYDS BANKING GROUP
CPRE The countryside charity
Healthy Air Coalition
CIPD
youth futures FOUNDATION
Trussell Ending hunger together
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## LOCATION
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